

Two Boy Pioneers



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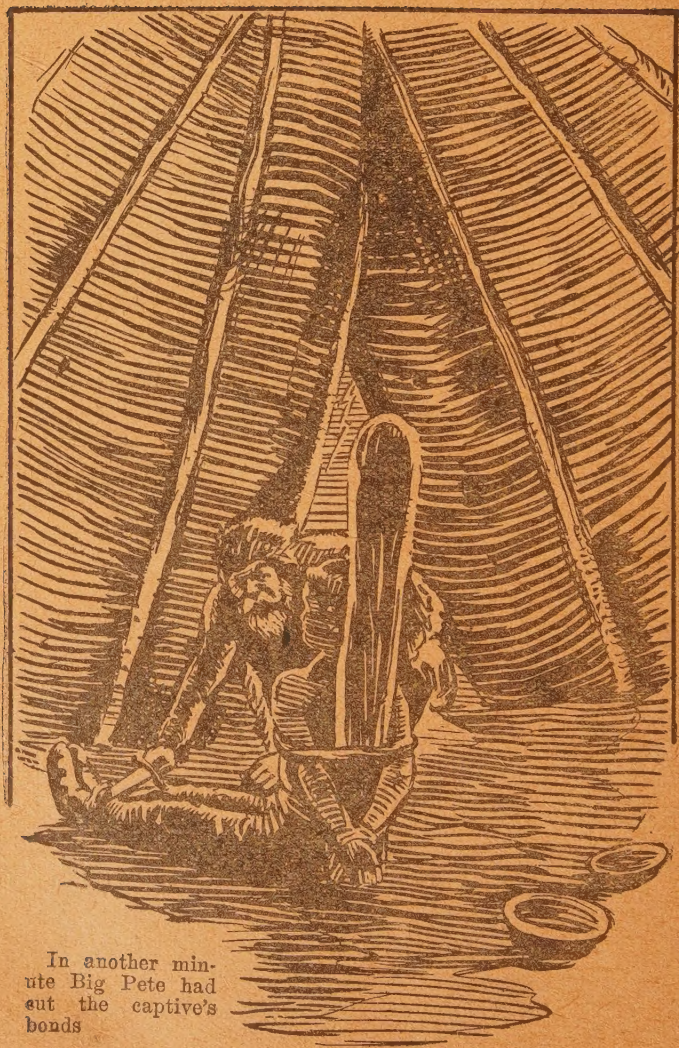
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In another minute Big Pete had cut the captive's bonds

TWO BOY PIONEERS

By JAMES A. BRADEN

AUTHOR OF

"CONNECTICUT BOYS IN THE WESTERN RESERVE," "FAR
PAST THE FRONTIER," "THE AUTO BOYS," "THE
AUTO BOYS' BIG SIX," ETC.

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TWO BOY PIONEERS

CHAPTER I

THE ATTACK

For a fortnight the boys gave themselves to work upon their little "farm," attending their corn and vegetables, which had now come up and were growing finely. They made several exploring tours and visited a couple of Indian towns within reach, hoping to find a horse. In this they were unsuccessful.

They found that from all the towns a greater part of the warriors had gone to the northwest for the fighting expected there, and the horses had been taken with them. Wandering Mingoes who were met gave reports of the same state of affairs existing in other villages. Nevertheless, the boy pioneers enjoyed these excursions. They did some hunting—enough to keep their larder well supplied with fresh meat, but most of all, they enjoyed the beauties of the woods and waters they traversed. In all directions from their cabin the scenery was beautiful, but none more so than the gorges through which their own river

—the Cuyahoga—flowed, two or three miles away where the water tumbled over and around great stones, splashing and gurgling down little declivities, till at last it swept over a considerable precipice with a rush and tremendous roaring; and dashing and foaming, raced on through a narrower, stony channel till it came to a wider bed in the broad valley where the cabin of the traders stood.

And the river was only a part of the grandeur of the forest scenery. There were immense rocks in the narrow valley, many half-hidden by mosses and trailing vines. In their shadows the wild flowers bloomed and above them the trees leaned and wild birds sang. Except for the lakes where they floated for hours in their canoe, fishing or quietly resting after their labor or a hard tramp through the woods, there was no spot the boys liked so well as this wonderful valley. It was not far from their home, and the lakes, too, were within reach.

Indeed, in all their travels the young men found no location more desirable for their home than the spot they had chosen, except the one they hoped to secure at the junction of the Port-

age trail and the river. Much they regretted having failed to secure land there.

The lads talked of this one evening before their cabin, and then fell again to discussing a plan of marketing their furs.

"If only Tom Fish were here to act as our guide, I wouldn't hesitate about starting for Detroit at once," said Ree.

"I dreamed about Tom, last night, Ree; I forgot to tell you," John answered. "I thought I saw him and Big Pete Ellis standing where we stood when Capt. Pipe told us to go, and Tom was pointing the way just as the chief pointed. Then Big Pete disappeared and I dreamed I saw Tom and Big Buffalo wrestling."

"The furs should bring us over three hundred dollars," said Ree, not paying much attention to John's account of his dream. "We could afford to pay Tom, or any good guide and helper, well. I wonder what has become of him."

"I wonder whether he has found Arthur Bridges? That scalp is still hanging in Big Buffalo's lodge," said John, thinking of the mission which had brought the old hunter into the woods with them.

Thus the evening was spent in talk while

the moon rose over the trees, looking down upon the lonely cabin so far from civilization, so beset by unseen dangers, softly and gently as though the peaceful scene were never to be disturbed.

There was no sign of the awful conflict drawing near. There was no omen of the bloodshed soon to come. A gray wolf lurking in the forest's darkness, howling at the moon, some night-bird's scream were all that broke the pleasant harmony of nature's sounds. All visible things gave promise of a quiet, perfect night. No thought of the eyes of redmen who grimly watched from the darker shadows, came to the minds of the young pioneers. They had no premonition of disaster as they went inside at last, closed the door, drew in the latch-string and went to bed.

Higher and higher the moon rose, its changing position in the sky telling of the passing of the night. An hour before dawn its light went out, as it sank behind the westward trees and hills, and thick, black darkness came.

Stealthily a dozen dusky figures left the woods and moved quickly and quietly across the clearing and up the rise of ground to the silent cabin. They paused before the little house and

two raised huge stone tomahawks above their shoulders to strike together a tremendous blow and break in the door.

"Ugh," a savage grunted. It was the signal. The tomahawks came down with terrific force. The crashing noise filled all the valley.

Violently awakened from a sound sleep by the terrifying sound and the jar, Ree Kingdom leaped from his bed, instantly followed by John Jerome.

"Robbers!" the latter ejaculated in a scared whisper.

"Indians!" cried Ree, seizing his rifle, as another terrible blow nearly shattered the door; and before he could reach a loophole, still other stone hammers rained upon the stout oak puncheons and in a second's time sent the whole compact mass flying from the hinges.

At the same instant Ree fired, and with a pistol in each hand, John's shots came like a double echo.

Amazed that the door had not yielded at the first double, gigantic blow upon it, bewildered by the consequent failure of their plan to rush in and seize the young Palefaces ere the lads had recovered from surprise, the Indians seemed terror-

stricken as one of their number fell, and they sped away in the darkness.

The attack, the repulse of the savages and the restoration of perfect quiet when they had fled, had consumed less than a minute. Save for the door hanging by a part of a single hinge, and the damp night air blowing cold upon their faces, the boys could easily have thought they were both the victims of some horrid dream or nightmare. But there was no time to doubt whether they could believe their senses.

“Help get the door up! Quick, John!” Ree’s voice was firm and fearless, and his chum sprang to do his bidding.

The door was quickly in place again, and propped tightly shut with the rough, but stout ladder which was used in climbing to the cabin loft. Its hinges were broken and the bar of wood which formed the latch, lay on the floor in splinters; but the strongly made door itself had undoubtedly saved the boys’ lives and, secured as it now was, could withstand another just such vigorous attack, should one be made.

This, however, the two friends hoped to guard against. They knew their assailants were Indians, but could guess no more. Why they

had been attacked they could not tell, and although they hoped that the enemy was only a band of thieving redskins bent on robbery, who would not make another attack after failing so completely in the first attempt, they were determined to be as vigilant as if the assault were certain to be renewed in another moment.

“Get into your clothes, John,” Ree urged, not taking his eyes from the loop-hole through which he watched, “then take my place, while I dress.”

John was dressed in a minute and Ree needed no greater length of time for the same task. It was still pitch dark outside as well as in the cabin, but with their ears wide open to detect the slightest sound, the boys felt that they could be sure of discovering any one who approached. Soon daylight would come and they then would learn whether the savages were still lurking near.

That the redskins might have not the least knowledge of their movements, nor be able to see to fire into the cabin loop-holes, the boys kindled no fire; and having stationed themselves, one in each of the front corners of their little house, thus commanding a view of the three sides from

which approach was possible, they spoke only in whispers, as they watched and waited.

Not far away—just in the borders of the woods, beyond the little corn-field, there was every evidence that the young pioneers would not wait in vain for the battle they expected. Big Buffalo and a party of Mingoos crouched in the darkness and the former's rage was terrible. In angry, scornful tones he berated his savage adherents for having fled from the cabin. For it was his plan which had been thwarted by the thickness and strength of the door the clever white boys had put up, and he little liked the prospect of an open fight, even with the odds so greatly in his favor.

A principal reason for this lay in the fact that the Buffalo himself, did not wish to appear in the battle. Knowing that the young Palefaces were under the protection of Capt. Pipe, he dared not openly attack them. He had, therefore, enlisted the services of a party of roving, merciless Mingoos, promising them rich plunder from the cabin if they would make the attack and carry off the boys and their property, leaving the place in such condition that it would appear that the lads had voluntarily packed their belongings and de-

parted. On this account the attack was made at night and in the manner related. He had kept in the back-ground himself, not wishing to be seen by the brave youths he hated, until they were securely bound, and their death so certain to speedily follow, that there would be no danger of their ever telling either Capt. Pipe or Gentle Maiden, of his treachery.

But now the blood boiled in Big Buffalo's veins. He no longer cared whether the boys should see and recognize him or not. He was determined that they must die, and if they were killed in their cabin and Capt. Pipe should hear of it, he would kill his own chief, he decided, if the latter made much ado over his action.

And so the cruel Redskin and his hired murderers watched and waited. If the Pale-faces attempted to leave the cabin they would have the lads at their mercy. If, when daylight came, and all was still, the door was opened, they would still remain in hiding, and bide their time to strike from cover, like a snake hidden in tall grass.

A thing which happened soon after daylight, however, changed Big Buffalo's plan entirely. As they lay in the utter darkness of the woods,

the Mingo brave who had been shot and wounded, felt himself to be dying. He thought only of one thing—revenge. What cared he for this Delaware whom they called Big Buffalo, or for his plans? He was dying and he would slay the one who shot him, though it took his last breath. And without a word to his companions, and unobserved by them, he crawled noiselessly away, and from a distant point, close to the river, crept with most painful care and patience toward the cabin, just visible in darker outlines against the blackness of the sky. Not a sound did he make, and neither the Buffalo nor the Mingoes noticed his absence.

Slowly came the gray dawn of morning. No sound was heard save the singing of birds and the cawing of a colony of crows. As the daylight grew rapidly brighter, Ree watched, going from one loop-hole to another, while John kindled a fire, which would not now increase their danger, and prepared a meager breakfast. Whether there was to be fighting or not, the boys were well aware that they must eat to keep up their strength, and they realized too, that an empty stomach is very poor company. Still all was silent.

"I am going to put my cap on a stick, open the door an inch or two, and hold it as though I was looking out," said John. "It will draw their fire, may be, if the heathen are watching us."

"It will do no harm, at least," said Ree, and with his cap, which, during the winter, he had gaily ornamented with squirrels' tails, on the end of the wooden poker, John removed the ladder which served as a prop. Gently he allowed the morning sunlight to stream in—an inch—two—four—six inches.

Then suddenly as a lightning flash a blood-curdling yell rent the air. The heavy door was pushed violently inward and fell with a crash.

As Ree and John in utmost surprise sprang quickly back, the wounded Mingo, struggling in the arms of death from the energy he had mustered to throw down the door, staggered toward them with uplifted tomahawk, as he tried to give another war cry. His face was horrible to behold as he strove for yet enough of life to accomplish his revenge, and tried again to emit a yell of victory. But the sound died in his throat, his tottering legs gave way beneath him, and he fell in a heap—dead.

One swift glance had told Ree the situation; and as he saw the savage already in death's clutches, he quickly drew John back beyond the Mingo's reach, and restrained him from wasting a bullet on the poor wretch whose spirit had so nearly fled. But in another moment the fierce warwhoops of other Indians were heard just outside the cabin.

With a cry of alarm John leaped over the prostrate form of the dead savage to raise the door to its place again, but it was weighted down by the body of the Mingo; and although Ree made haste to remove the latter, he was too late.

Big Buffalo and his party, attracted at once by the vengeful cry of the warrior whose absence they had not until then discovered, had rushed swiftly across the clearing and up the hill. With terrifying yells of rage and vengeance, the foremost members of the band sprang into the cabin.

Wildly excited by the fiendish cries, John grappled with a half-naked fellow whose tomahawk he narrowly escaped, and Ree sent another to the floor with a shot from his rifle. With a pistol he so wounded a third that the fellow sprang from the door, Ree following. Big Buf-

falo saw the boy and fired. The bullet grazed Ree's scalp, and, clutching his rifle, he turned towards the furious Delaware. He parried a blow from the Buffalo's tomahawk and desperately leaping upon him, bore the Indian's hideously painted body to the ground.

John, with an ugly knife wound in his arm, escaped from the Mingo with whom he was struggling inside the cabin, and dashed through a number of savages just entering the door. Instantly he comprehended Ree's desperate situation, and, intending to draw off the other Indians, in hope that his friend could master Big Buffalo if the latter had no help, he started to run around the cabin, certain that in a foot race he could win. And as he had expected, he was pursued; but his plan was thwarted, for a quick-witted brave dashed around the little house in the opposite direction, followed by two others.

A little cry of surprise came from John's lips as he reached the narrow ledge between the west wall of the cabin and the high perpendicular bank dropping down to the river, and saw three Mingo dash around the corner ahead of him, their tomahawks raised to strike out his brains.

Like a flash he realized the deadly peril of his position; but he did not hesitate or falter. As though he had raced to the spot expressly for the purpose, he launched his body into the air with lightning-like rapidity; straight out, then down—down—like a flash he flew, and the turbid waters of the river were rushing over him before the savages caught their breaths to send forth piercing cries of baffled rage and hate.

Disappointed and tremendously surprised as they were, the Mingoes acted quickly. Two remained to fire at the helpless boy the moment he appeared above the current, the others immediately ran to aid Big Buffalo; but their help was not required. A savage had already seized Ree from behind, and with his hands clutching the lad's throat, choking him until his eyes bulged out, dragged him backward and held him down.

CHAPTER II

THE GAUNTLET

IF REE had had the strength of a horse, his struggles to free himself must have been useless, with Big Buffalo and two Mingoës bearing him heavily to the earth, and he ceased resisting. Even then the Indians pressed their knees and fists upon his body with vicious cruelty, and a fourth savage kicked him repeatedly.

But the unhappy boy scarcely felt the blows and bruises as he was half dragged, half carried away from the cabin to the foot of the slope. For his thoughts were of John whom he believed to be still struggling in the cabin, if he were not already dead. He longed to go to his chum's assistance, and struggled partially to his feet.

As if they read his thoughts, however, the Indians bore him down again, and while Big Buffalo knelt astride his body, two Mingoës tied his hands and feet so tightly that blood ran from his wrists and ankles.

Through all this torture not a word of pain or complaint escaped Ree's lips. So intently was he listening for some sound which might tell him how John had fared, that he hardly noticed his own pain or thought of his own danger. The sudden attack, the fight and his capture had taken place so quickly that he did not yet realize all that had happened.

As the minutes passed, however, and he heard nothing of his companion, the full extent of the terrible disaster which had overtaken him and his most loved friend slowly dawned upon the lad. That John was dead seemed certain; that death by torture awaited himself, he had no doubt. And this would be the end of all their plans to deal fairly with the redskins and win and retain their friendship; the end of their long cherished hope to build homes for themselves and become respected and useful citizens in the new western country; the end of a thousand ambitious thoughts of the pride they would have in returning to Connecticut some day, crowned with success. Gloomy indeed were Ree's reflections and by no means in keeping with his usual undaunted, determined disposition. He thought of his friends in the east and the assertion he had

laughingly made that he would return with a whole skin and a whole heart. He smiled in a grim, unhappy way as he remembered the boyish boast, and a Mingo, larger and uglier than the rest, mistaking his smile for one of defiance, struck him a cruel blow upon the face.

Maddened with sudden anger Ree fiercely struggled to free himself; but it was no use, and he soon lay quiet again.

The brutal blow he had received served the purpose, however, of rousing the boy from the despondent state into which he had sunk, and he became once more his own alert, quick-witted self. Hope came to him. He resolved to escape sooner or later, and his faith in himself was so firm when his mind was set upon a purpose, that he at once felt strong and courageous as was his usual state.

With this brighter feeling came also the thought that John might have escaped, after all. He knew that Big Buffalo had hurried away to join some Mingoes who had started down the river, and decided that they were probably searching for his chum. Time was passing and there was no sound of their returning. This was surely a bright indication.

Three Mingoes guarded Ree zealously, one

sitting at each side and one standing near his feet, as they waited. All was quiet. Except for the wide-open doorway, the little cabin of the bluff looked home-like and cozy as of yore. There was no sign of the dreadful struggle which had taken place, save the dead bodies of two Indians which had been carried into the shade of the woods near by. The birds were singing joyously as ever. Insects hummed, and a slight breeze gently stirred the air. So the forenoon passed.

At last Big Buffalo and three of his savage allies returned. Where the other two or three (Ree did not know exactly which) were, was not a difficult question. Undoubtedly they had either remained to search for John or else had dragged him off to torture or captivity. Ree noticed with an inward sense of pleasure that one of the Indians who returned, was severely wounded. He was the brave with whom John had fought inside the cabin. There was a knife-thrust in his side.

At a word from Big Buffalo all the Mingoes bounded up the hill and began to loot the empty cabin. The Buffalo himself, silent and moody, guarded the prisoner. However, the ransacking of the house, so difficult to build, so quickly robbed of its best treasures, occupied only a few

minutes. Ree saw with some satisfaction that the savages carried off comparatively few furs, though they secured many articles of no less value.

Making a considerable quantity of these things into a heavy pack, as they returned, to the foot of the hill, the Indians commanded Ree to rise, and they fastened the bundle upon his back. Then with scarcely a word they removed the thongs from the boy's feet and ordered him to march.

With one more anxious look in all directions, hoping, yet fearing, to see some sign of his friend, Ree stepped into the place to which he was pushed, between Big Buffalo and the particularly ugly Mingo, previously spoken of, and the march began. Although his hands were still tied, it was a relief to be upon his feet again, and now he considered that, since there was some likelihood that John had escaped, he had but to secure his own liberty to be himself again.

To almost any other person the prospect would have appeared dark indeed. To Return Kingdom it was not so. Had he been sure that his loved chum was alive and free, he could have felt that there was nothing more to cause him

worry. But if John were dead—oh, he would rather—far rather—that it had been himself whose life had gone out. For he had brought the younger lad into this wild country, and even more than if they had been brothers, he felt, he was responsible for all that happened to him.

Many other thoughts came to the captive boy as the procession of warriors moved silently through the woods along the river. Once he caught sight of two Indians in the rear. Each of whom carried over his shoulder the body of one of the two who would walk or wake never more. The burdens were heavy and partly on this account the savages marched slowly; but they came, about the middle of the afternoon to a slight bend in the river where, beneath some overhanging willows two large canoes had been sunk in the water. These they quickly raised and prepared to continue their journey in them.

Again Ree's feet were tied, and as an additional precaution against his escape, a strip of rawhide was tied about his neck and the other end made fast to the bonds about his ankles, obliging him to remain in a most uncomfortable attitude, bent nearly double.

Where were they going? Ree asked himself

this question but once. He had no doubt that it was to some Mingo village that they were traveling, and he was well aware of the fate which probably awaited him. The barbarous torture—death at the stake—which he had once seen pictured, was clear in his mind's eye, and far from pleasantly did he contemplate it. His head was aching violently from the scalp wound he had received, the toilsome march under his heavy load and the cramped position in which he now was forced to lie, but he kept his courage up by forming plan after plan for escape. Once, in the remote hope that John might somehow be near and hear him, he whistled the shrill call they had both so long known. He received for doing so a savage blow upon his throbbing head, struck with a canoe paddle.

Then Ree remained quiet, but his mind was active and he was glad that it was nearly dark. Soon the Indians turned their canoes into a good-sized creek flowing into the river from the west, continuing their way up this stream between high frowning banks, until darkness overtook them. At a spot where the steep bluffs above the water sloped down more gradually, they went into camp.

Eagerly Ree waited for an opportunity to slip away, as the preparations for the night were in progress, but he found none. The strap about his neck was loosened, but another was tied about his waist and its ends then fastened about the arms of two savages between whom he lay down, after they had all eaten sparingly of dried venison.

The same desire to save his strength which had prompted Ree to eat the food given him, though it was fed into his mouth as though he were a dog, caused him to try to sleep and secure needed rest. He wished to forget for a time the danger he was in and to think with a clearer mind when he awoke, of plans for deliverance. Well he realized the necessity of awaiting with patience the coming of the opportunity which, he felt, must come to every man who sets his teeth in unyielding determination.

Desirous as he was of securing rest, Ree was unable to sleep, except for brief intervals of uneasy dreaming, and he welcomed the coming of the morning though he knew that that very day might be his last; for his trust was in an all-wise Providence and in his heart was a calm faith that if he should not be able to escape, he

could endure whatever torture the savages inflicted without a groan. So he bore himself with a cool courage that made the Mingoes wonder, as they prepared at sunrise to continue their journey. And still the looked-for opportunity to make a dash for freedom did not come. Soon the Indians and their prisoner were again toiling up the stream in the canoes, and as before Ree was bound down in a tortuous position.

At the end of a couple of hours' travel, the stream became too shallow for the canoes, which were then run in under some overhanging bushes and sunk. Once more a heavy load was hung upon the captive's shoulders and moving forward on foot again, the party climbed the bluffs and struck off through the forest.

It was nearly noon when the Indians halted. They were within a mile of some village, for now they fired guns and sent one of their number forward to announce their arrival. In an hour a score of Mingoes came to meet the war party, rejoicing over the capture of a prisoner, and mourning for the two dead warriors by striking and kicking the boy captive. Then the journey to the town was continued; but to give assurance to all that the prisoner was to be burned at the

stake, he first was stripped to the waist and his face and body painted black.

It was with genuine difficulty that Ree persuaded himself to patiently bear the indignities heaped upon him yet a little longer, rather than to fight so stubbornly then and there that he might be killed by a bullet and so escape torture. One thought helped him to do this. It was, that he would undoubtedly be made to run the gauntlet, and at that time he might break through the lines and trust to his legs to carry him to safety before he could be recaptured.

But sore disappointment was in store for the lad. The most cruel practice of forcing a captive to run the gauntlet with his hands bound behind him, was resorted to.

Before the brush and bark lodges of what appeared to be a temporary village, warriors young and old, and squaws as well, rejoicing fiendishly, ranged themselves in two parallel rows a few feet apart. They were armed with whips, clubs and pointed sticks, and looking down the lines of cold, cruel faces which watched expectantly, as Big Buffalo and another held him ready to give him a shove among his tormentors when all were ready, Ree could not see one friendly eye.

"It is now or never," the tormented lad mentally told himself, and in the faint hope that John might have escaped and followed him to attempt a rescue, and to give him notice to be near, if this were true, he whistled their old, familiar call. His dry, cracked lips almost refused to do their part, but loud and shrill the sharp, peculiar notes rang out. As though angered by the sound, Big Buffalo at the same moment gave the captive a violent push into the barbarous gauntlet.

Instantly an Indian youth of about Ree's age, sharply prodded the boy with a piece of pointed hickory, and another struck his bare back with a bunch of briars. Others used clubs and whips most viciously as the prisoner darted among them.

At the instant he started Ree had noticed a savage half way down the line on the left, with a heavy knotted club upraised, and as he sprang forward he kept his eyes on that red brute. Swerving sharply to the right, he suddenly turned and sprang to the left as he reached this fellow, hurling his body feet foremost, directly against the Indian's stomach.

With a yell the Indian fell beneath his feet,

and the horrible cries of the other savages ringing fiercely in his ears, Ree leaped over his victim and dashed madly toward the woods two hundred feet away. Only a quarter of the distance had he covered, however, when a giant white man with long uncombed hair and beard and uncouth Indian dress, bounded suddenly into his path, caught him about the shoulders and, in spite of the lad's desperate resistance, flung him to the ground. In another instant a score of savages pounced mercilessly upon him.

Without more ado Ree was dragged bodily away, and in a few minutes securely bound to a small tree about which a shelter of poles had been erected. There he was kicked and spit upon by squaws and even children, till, worn out and dispirited, he partially lost consciousness. He thought that death itself would seem welcome.

The giant white man—white by nature, though plainly an Indian by choice—had given Ree no attention from the moment he had hurled him to the earth. He approached the well-nigh insensible boy, however, when the squaws had grown weary and departed, and saying a few words in the Mingo tongue to the savage who stood guard, the latter walked away.

Who was this white man? Ree recovered sufficiently to interest himself in the question. Was it Simon Girty, the renegade, of whom he had often heard?

Contemptuously the giant fellow looked at the captive, then bestowing a kick upon him, turned his face away. But he remained near the enclosure, and in a coarse but not loud, undertone inquired:

“Where be ye from?”

Ree did not answer. He cared to have nothing to do with such a human monster.

“Be ye from Connecticut?” the man asked in a somewhat gentle tone.

“From Bruceville,” was the answer.

“Huh! Ever hear o’ Jim Huson?”

“I know him.”

“Dead?”

“No, he was hurt, but was getting well, the last I knew.”

“Huh! Don’t speak so loud, boy! Did ye ever hear o’ Peter Ellis—Big Pete, they called him?”

“I knew him by sight,” answered Ree, “and I—I think—”

“Never you mind what you think!” he in-

interrupted, a deep scowl darkening his face.
“I’m him—I’m Pete Ellis, if that’s what ye
was a goin’ to say.”

CHAPTER III

FLIGHT

INSTANTLY Ree recalled the flight of Big Pete and the part he had had in the attempt to capture the fellow. He was sure the giant white man must have recognized him in spite of his blackened face and body, and his hopes fell. Was the renegade revealing his own identity only to make his revenge on him for his part in driving him out of Connecticut, the sweeter?

Big Pete seemed to read Ree's thoughts.

"Oh, I rec'lect the last time I seen ye boy! Guess ye ain't fergot hev ye?" he said, almost contemptuously.

"No, and I should do the same again." Ree's voice was coolly defiant.

"Huh! Think I lay what ye done that night up again' ye, do ye?" Then sinking his voice almost to a whisper the outlaw continued in a very different tone: "But I don't; I'm a goin' to set ye free."

Remembering how harshly he had thought of

the big fellow who now spoke so kindly, but a minute before, Ree could not at once reply.

"I will owe my life to you," he said presently, however, "I did only what I thought right that night last fall—the night—you went away."

"I'm a goin' to tell ye somethin', boy."

Before he said more the fugitive from Connecticut's laws strode up and down a few minutes, and made a pass at the captive with the butt of his rifle. Ree perceived why this was done, as an old, but very large dignified Indian strutted by.

"There's a tough old warrior; a chief of the Six Nations, the old League of the Iroquois. I didn't want him to see me talkin' to ye," Big Pete continued when the Indian had passed on. Before he could speak further, however, there came other interruptions, the prisoner being almost in the center of the Indian camp which was in a small clearing.

After a time, the day being very warm, nearly all the savages sought out the shady places, none of which were near the captive. Then Big Pete appearing to look at the captive only occasionally went on:

"I was sayin' I had somethin' to tell ye.

D'ye know how I knew ye? It was by yer whistle. I he'erd it the night we had our hoss race—. If 't hadn't been fer that, I wouldn't 'a' known ye. Good thing I did rec'lect right away an' turn around in time to stop ye when ye lit out through the ga'ntlet. Ye'd never a' got away an' they'd 'a' killed ye. Now I'm goin' to tell ye what I hed to say:

“I didn't even allow as Jim Huson was killed, but it did worry me some. What makes me mad is them Connecticut mush-heads thinkin' they've run me out o' the country. So I'm goin' to get you free, an' ye've got to go to Bruceville an' tell everybody as how ye seen me off west—that I was a livin' on the fat o' the land and hed got rich bein' chief o' the Mingoes. Tell 'em ye was captured an' I, bein' the chief, set ye free. Tell 'em I said I was comin' back to Connecticut some day, an' marry the purtiest girl in Bruceville, an' buy the biggest farm in the country an' make folks take off their hats to me—or I'll horsewhip 'em. An' ye ain't to tell a soul a thing but what I've told ye.”

The outlaw's manner had become fiercely energetic, though he spoke very low. It was plain that he had planned long on doing just

what he wished Ree to say he had done, and was going to do; but seeing no prospect of realizing his hopes, he wished to taunt his old enemies by making them fear his return.

"But what you say isn't true, is it?" Ree asked in a quiet, friendly way. "You are not a chief?"

"Huh! True? Course 'tain true! D'ye s'pose I'd be living here with the dirty Mingoes if 'twas true? D'ye s'pose I'd be over-fed one day an' starved the next, an' sleep on the ground, pretendin' I like these bloody butchers, if I was rich, or their chief? But that ain't the p'int. I want them Bruceville saints to be afraid of me—to talk about me, an' be expectin' me back. It don't matter if I don't ever come! They'll be afraid of me all the while!"

"If you don't like this life with the Mingoes why don't you leave it?" asked Ree in his friendly, earnest way.

"Huh! Leave it? What to do? Starve to death? Will ye do what I want ye to? Ye go free to-night, or ye go on the fire to-morrow! But mind ye hev to swear not to tell anything but what I want ye to!"

For a little time Ree forgot his own suffer-

ing and danger—forgot John and all else as he pondered on the terrible life of the one who made this strange request of him. Here was a man dragging out an existence that he hated, all for what? Because he had committed crimes and fled, and was now afraid to “face the music.”

“Pete Ellis,” said the boy at last, slowly and solemnly, “you are wearing your life out in a way that is worse than if you were to be burned at the stake, as I may be. You suffer day after day by living in a manner which you know you despise, and yet don’t make an effort for any thing else. You say you can’t quit this way of living; I say you can, and I will help you. Leave these savages this very night. We will go together. We will find my partner, John Jerome—He is a Bruceville boy—”

“I know his dad.”

“So much the better, then, you should be willing to help for his sake—We will find John, I say, if he is still alive, and we will go at once to Connecticut. I promise to stick by you through thick and thin and I can get Capt. Bowen to help us, and you can square every charge there may be against you. Soon you will be comfortably housed, comfortably fed and respected. But

man alive! Even if you had to go to prison for a time, it would soon be over, and you have friends in Bruceville who will stand by you if—if you—do what's right. And I'll work for you and with you, not only because I'll owe my life to you, but—"

The outlaw turned away. Ree's tones had touched his heart.

"Lord, boy," he said, "it would be me as would owe my life to you, but it can't be did. Time was when I——Why, boy, I was brought up as well as any on 'em, but I run away before the war; an'—after I got into trouble I never went back again. An' now I've made my bed and I've got to lay in it."

"You can do all that I say and more. And you have more than half of your life to live yet!"

Big Buffalo and a Mingo came near but Ree did not see them.

"Will ye shut up? An' ye better warble yer death song if ye've got any spunk."

These were Big Pete's words and there was anger and wicked cruelty in his tones. He strode away and Big Buffalo stepped up and took his place as guard over the prisoner.

"—— Fool! fool! —— fool! No get away

now!" grunted the Buffalo savagely, and viciously slapped Ree's cheek.

What should he do? The unhappy captive turned the question over and over in his mind. That Big Pete could have spoken in such a brutal way only because he saw Big Buffalo coming up, seemed possible, but his voice had in it a ring of deadly earnest. If he could but speak to him once more! Ree prayed. He must escape that night, with the white man's help, or without it. But how?

He was securely bound and guarded. Not only was he tied hand and foot, the bands about his wrists being so tight that his hands were swollen almost to bursting, causing him great pain, but he was also tied to the tree. Dark—bitterly dark was the prospect, and one of less courage and resolution must have been absolutely without hope.

Thinking again of Big Pete's proposal, Ree resolved positively that he certainly would not go to Connecticut and tell the false and ridiculous stories the fellow wished the good people of Bruceville to believe. Some other bargain must be made with the outlaw, or he must escape unaided. And he made up his mind that come what

might he would not hesitate to shed blood, if necessary, and that he would escape or die in the endeavor.

The hot sun beat down upon the Indian camp and the Indians dozed drowsily, awaiting with the stolid patience with which the Red race is gifted, the coming of the morrow and its barbarous festivities. Scarcely a breath of air was stirring; the atmosphere seemed stifling. Again and again Ree asked for water as the afternoon dragged on, but no heed was given him. He was sick and sore from rough usage, insufficient food and fatigue. And as his thirst became so great that a white, sticky saliva, which he could not remove, formed in his mouth, he suffered intensely. Again came the feeling of despondency and the thought that death would be welcome. With difficulty he shook it off. The time was too short — too precious, to be spent in repining or bemoaning his probable fate.

At last sleep came to the poor boy's relief and though savages came from time to time to look at, and gloat over their young victim, he did not waken. In his dreams he was with John once again in their cozy cabin. Again he was back in Connecticut, sitting silent and alone in the little

churchyard. Still again he seemed to be talking to Mrs. Catesby and telling her he had found a buyer for the yearling colt. But with a start he passed from dreamland to the desperate reality of his terrible position.

The firing of guns was the noise which wakened Ree. Gathering his scattered senses, he knew that it was not relief which was coming to him, as he had at first hoped; but only more Indians arriving to see him burned. They had shot off their guns as they approached, as a sign of friendliness. Delawares observed the same custom, the captive remembered.

The wind had risen while Ree slept. He was glad to notice this, and to see that a thunder storm was brewing. The long day would end in rain and darkness. Already the branches and leaves of the trees were tossed and swayed by the ever increasing gale, and the greater the noise and blackness of the storm, the better his chance for getting away, should he be able to break or otherwise free himself of his bonds, Ree reflected.

Big Buffalo, silent and ugly, still stood guard. Imploringly the prisoner again asked for water. The redskin did not move, and the boy did not repeat the request. Faster and faster the

darkness was coming on, and soon came the rain, in torrents, beating down so furiously that the enclosure of poles afforded little protection. But Ree was glad it did not, for, feeling a steady dripping on his shoulder, he turned his head and opening his parched lips caught the cooling drops in his mouth as they fell. When the storm had abated somewhat, Big Pete's voice was suddenly heard.

"Hev we got to watch the Paleface dog all night?"

The question was addressed to Big Buffalo.

"Ugh," with no other answer than this, and a snarl and a growl, the Indian turned away and the white man took his place as guard.

For a long time Ree hesitated to speak, but at last as Big Pete remained silent, he said:

"I have been waiting and hoping to see you again, I—"

"Drat you! Stop yer whinin'! I'll knock yer head off!" loudly interrupted the outlaw, and such savage brutality was there in the man's voice, that Ree abandoned hope of securing help from him.

Again the boy busied himself with new plans for escape, and secretly tried to loosen the thongs

about his wrists and ankles. He thought the strips of skins seemed looser, now that they were wet; at any rate they were slippery and maybe they would stretch. He dared not, however, go too far with his endeavors at that time; for, though it was pitch dark, he could see that some of the Indians were still moving about the smoldering camp-fires nearby. The fury of the storm was over but a drizzling rain was falling, and the constant drip of the water and the murmuring of the wind in the trees, made a most melancholy sound.

A couple of hours passed. The Indians were asleep, but Big Pete, silently watchful, squatted on the ground, a blanket thrown over his shoulders, his rifle under his arm. After a time, he moved slightly, looked toward the campfires then all about him, and last of all toward Ree. He rose to his feet and leaned on his rifle, listening. All was quiet. With a stealthy step he bent one knee and craning his neck toward the prisoner, whispered.

"Ye rec'lect what you said to me 'bout goin' to Connecticut with me?"

"Yes," was the answer, spoken almost defiantly.

“Will ye stick by everything ye said? Cross yer heart an’ hope to die if ye don’t?”

“I cross my heart and hope I may die if I do not.”

“Then, boy, here’s where Pete Ellis an’ you make a start fer a land o’ civilized cookin’ an’ feather beds. An’ the Lord help us; it’s a desperate job we’re in for.”

A calm, deep feeling of joy came to Ree’s heart and all his strength and courage returned, as he realized that deliverance was at hand. But of a sudden there came to him the thought—could he trust Big Pete? Long ago he had thought sometimes that he might have been the mysterious prowler who had thrice attempted his life and killed old Jerry. Somehow this belief rushed upon his mind with great force at this critical time, and bluntly, though in a friendly tone, he said at once:

“Pete Ellis, let us understand one another, from the start. I must tell you here and now, that if you are the man who followed John Jerome and me on our way west, and shot at us and at last killed our horse, I cannot and will not keep my promise to you.”

“Boy, I don’t know what yer talkin’ about, so help me, I don’t.”

As this conversation took place Ellis was on his hands and knees partially inside the prisoner’s narrow lodge. His amazement at the sudden question, as shown by his actions and tone, satisfied Ree that he spoke the truth.

“I believe you, Pete,” the boy whispered gently, and added, “Forgive me, I’ll tell you all about why I asked, when we are safe away.”

In another minute Big Pete had cut the captives’ bonds, but before allowing him to stir, rose to his feet and looked all about. Then he stooped low and reaching into the rude shelter took Ree’s right hand and gently drew him forth. There was no mistaking the friendliness of his touch, nor of his words as he whispered:

“It’s you an’ me for it together, boy. Ye thought I was pretty hard on ye, didn’t ye? Thought I was all put out by what ye said to me! I had to do jist as I did, boy; these Mingoës are such suspicious devils! Now, ye ready? Don’t ye breathe; foller close behind me till we get clear o’ the camp.”

“Ready,” Ree whispered, cautiously but confidently, and moved slowly forward.

Oh, what a relief it was to stand upon his feet again! To move his hands freely before him! He did not mind the pain he felt as he crept cautiously along, after having been in a cramped position for so many hours. He did not now for a moment doubt that in a very little time he would be free. Closely he followed his leader as Big Pete picked his way carefully through the camp. They passed within a few feet of a bark-covered shelter and plainly heard the breathing of the Indians under it. One of them stirred restlessly; the Palefaces paused. The Indian turned over and slept again, and the man and boy crept cautiously on. Full well they knew that discovery would mean death to both.

In a little while they had passed outside the camp, and then at a slightly faster pace, made their way toward the deeper shadows of the surrounding forest.

"We're gettin' there," Big Pete turned to whisper, but at the same instant there loomed up before them, not a yard away, but scarcely discernible in the blackness of the night, the figure of an Indian of giant size.

CHAPTER IV

FACING NEW DANGERS

“THE WHITE brother walks late.”

It was the voice of the redskin which broke the silence, and he placed a detaining hand on Big Pete's shoulder, as he spoke.

A thrill of alarm and of failing hope ran through Ree's nerves, and for an instant he was of a mind to make a sudden, bold dash into the deeper shadows of the woods. But in a moment he was himself again.

“Chief High Horse is also walking in the night,” Big Pete made answer to the Indian, promptly and collectedly.

“Old men do not sleep as young braves,” the savage replied in excellent English. “My Pale-face brother was left to guard a prisoner; now he walks beyond the camp-fire; and the captive—is with him.”

Big Pete made a sudden movement as though to draw his knife and plunge the blade to the Indian's heart, before the savage could give the

alarm; but the hand of the great chief seized his wrist and held it fast.

At the same moment Ree leaped forward, ready to make a desperate fight rather than be retaken.

“My tongue is not crooked, Chief High Horse,” growled the white man, “and I’ll not deny that this prisoner and I are about to escape—escape or die! And I warn you, chief though you be, and an older man than myself, that your blood will stain the ground if you do not let us pass!”

Big Pete spoke in a low tone but his voice was most terribly earnest. Even at such a time Ree found himself wondering how the rough fellow could use such good language, when it was certainly not his ordinary speech. But Big Pete, like many other men, had learned to speak grammatically when addressing Indians who were accustomed to use good language themselves,—such Indians as this proud chieftain to whom he spoke now.

“Is High Horse but a squaw? Ugh! Think not that Paleface or Redman could make a Mohawk tremble! The white brother speaks as a child. At the call of High Horse all the Mingo

warriors will be astir, keen as the wolf on the blood-wet trail. Think not by such silly talk to move a chief of the bravest of the brave tribes of the Iroquois! Ugh!"

"Chief High Horse, the Mingoes have been my friends, and I am doing them no injury in leaving them. My skins, my blankets and all that is in my lodge, I leave for them; but their ways are not the ways of the white men. Their captive is from my own village. He is taking me to my people. I am taking him to his."

There was something very touching in Big Pete's tone. Time was flying and at any moment the Indian camp might discover the absence of the prisoner and the guard. Something must be done, and it was Ree who did it; for as by an act of Providence, suddenly he remembered when and where he had heard the Indian name, High Horse, before, and immediately he made it known.

"Chief High Horse," said he, "is the friend of my friend. As I left my home for the west, a brave soldier of the wars—Captain Wm. Bowen gave to me a knife and said the noble chieftain, High Horse, had given it to him. And he asked me, should I meet the famous Mohawk, to show

him the knife and tell him how I came by it, and to say that Captain Bowen will never forget his red brother."

"Ugh!"

The Indian made no other reply, but in this expressive savage ejaculation doubt of the truth of the words he heard, was plainly implied.

"But the knife, I am very sorry to say," Ree went on, "was lost in the side of a wolf which with others attacked me when the snow lay deep and frozen, and I was forced to find safety in a tree."

Another exclamation of interest escaped the Indian, and Big Pete in his surprise gave a low whistle, quickly checking himself, fortunately in the midst of that dangerous proceeding.

"I fastened the knife in a cleft stick and so defended myself," Ree went on. "The knife was lost, as I have said, else would I claim the friendship and protection of Chief High Horse. We—my friend and I—have had no quarrel with the Mingoes—no quarrel with the Delawares, only Big Buffalo. It was he who led the attack upon our cabin, and we were obliged to fight. But I ask you Chief High Horse, in the name of your old friend who befriended you, to let us pass. Give us until the moon has set as a start; then

sound the alarm. I ask only that, Chief—only that.”

As Ree spoke, he knew that Big Pete clutched the handle of his scalping knife. Dark as it was, he could not be mistaken, and well he also knew that an unfavorable reply from the Indian would plunge them all at once into a deadly conflict, with chances that they would have a race for their lives with the odds against them. And with intensity of eagerness and anxiety he waited the chief's reply. After a pause of but a few seconds, though it seemed as many minutes, the Indian spoke. His only word was:

“Come.”

Instantly High Horse turned about and speedily but stealthily stole away farther into the woods. With equal noiselessness Ree and Big Pete followed, the latter murmuring in a low undertone his words of astonishment at the turn affairs had taken. Clearly he had expected the very opposite.

A quarter of a mile from the camp in a shaded and very dark glade, the Indian stopped and turning about he seized Ree's hand and shook it warmly.

“Has the young brother food? He must

have his rifle. I now give him the knife which was the gift of Captain Bowen. A Mingo hunter found it in the side of a great she wolf dead in the woods. It was the Great Spirit who sent it in that way to High Horse to show him how to repay the kindness of the brave white soldier who gave him life and food and powder. High Horse knows and loves the Great Spirit and understands, so he has done as he has done. The Mohawk does not ask mercy nor does he show mercy."

High Horse was gone more quickly than he had spoken. But Ree now knew and understood, and blessed the day that the wolves had attacked him. He resolved to let the Indian know how grateful he felt, but as they waited, Big Pete cautioned the lad against expressing his thanks in words, saying that the savage would be displeased.

Then in whispers Ree told his new-found friend more of the marvelous manner in which the knife Capt. Bowen had given him, had been the means of their escape when they seemed completely cut off; and scarcely had Ellis ceased his words of wonderment, when High Horse stole softly up to them.

"High Horse goes with the young white brother," the Indian calmly announced, as he gave Ree the rifle which had been taken from him, also a blanket and a pouch containing pounded corn. How he had managed to secure these things was a mystery.

"I must find my friend John Jerome if I can, I want to go to our cabin or where it was, at least," Ree answered decisively, and it was quickly agreed that that course should be taken.

At as rapid a pace as the uneven ground and the darkness of the forest would permit, therefore, the trio hurried onward, High Horse, who was more familiar with the vicinity than the white men, leading the way. Not a great distance had they gone, when a distant war-whoop was heard.

"Gone," said High Horse significantly, and Ree knew well enough that his escape had been discovered. He made no comment, but mentally resolved that he should not again be taken alive.

"Me an' you stick together whatever happens, mind," Big Pete whispered to the boy, and then in a louder tone to the chief he said: "Chief High Horse, I would rather run than fight. The Mohawk knows that we must be careful."

The Mohawk truly did know how foolish it would be for the three of them to attempt to give battle to the pursuers who might, and might not, overtake them, and already he had changed his course so that they soon came to a little creek. This they waded for a long distance hoping to throw the Mingoes off the trail, should the latter succeed in following them, which it was unlikely they could do at least not before daylight.

Silently the little party pressed forward, all through the night, and paused but a little while to rest and eat and drink when daylight came. Soon afterward they reached a river which Ree rightly judged to be the Cuyahoga.

They were in a very wild and broken country. The rough massive ridges which sloped back from the river and the scrubby trees upon them, though beautiful in the spring verdure, made a gloomy impression; and, thinking of John and the slight probability that he would find his chum alive, Ree found that it required all his strength of will to keep his courage up. And he was so tired—so worn out by all that he had gone through, that his physical strength as well, came near deserting him.

“Now if we only had a canoe!” exclaimed

Big Pete, in an undertone, as they reached the water.

Ree would have welcomed that easier means of traveling also, but there was no use wishing. Without a pause High Horse kept on the way, evidently anxious to put as many miles as possible between themselves and their pursuers, though he had briefly stated that, unless they happened to meet roving Indians, who would betray them, they were safe from the Mingoës, who, the day before, had expected that at that hour they would be dancing about the torture fire.

The little party had left the beaten trail far behind and now they had very hard traveling in climbing the ridges which often projected down nearly to the water and pushing through the swampy places which they frequently found in the valleys between the hills.

Of a sudden, as they mounted to the top of one of these knolls, High Horse dropped to the ground, motioning to his companions to do likewise. Whatever the danger was, the white men had failed to see it; but now as they peeped through the underbrush which screened them, they noticed a thin column of vapory smoke, scarcely

discernible, except against the dark background of the trees, which, further on, rose to a considerable height.

The smoke seemed to rise from a gorge about fifty rods ahead of them. Intently the Mohawk chief studied this sign of probable danger. At last he said:

“One—two—may be three Indians, cooking meat.”

“How can Chief High Horse tell that?” Ree inquired, really enjoying the opportunity to rest, as he lay prone upon his stomach, staring ahead.

“Little fire; dry wood. Some dark spots in smoke show grease burning. Paleface would have more fire or not any, and maybe green wood that makes much smoke. More Indians than two-three would have more fire. Wait.”

With this answer, the old chief went forward slowly and cautiously from bush to bush and from tree to tree, and with deep interest and anxiety his white companions obeyed his command, “Wait,” while both took pains to see that their rifles were in readiness, should the weapons be needed.

Nearly half an hour passed before High Horse was beheld returning. As he drew near,

he motioned to Ree and Pete to go toward him and when they approached, held up two fingers, speaking only the words: "Friends of the Mohawk."

"Who?" Ree felt impelled to ask, not entirely willing to trust all of the old chief's friends.

But for answer High Horse abruptly asked his companions to follow him, and led the way, now taking an easier course than before, near the river bank and in plain view of any one who might chance along the stream—rather a dangerous proceeding, Ree thought.

A couple of minutes of rapid walking brought the three friends face to face with two Indians squatted beside a small fire in a sheltered valley. Both were eating venison, and they produced a knife and a haunch of savory meat for the newcomers to help themselves, without ado, and without showing the least surprise or more than indifferent interest in their callers.

High Horse had evidently explained to the two Indians, with whom he seemed to be well acquainted, how he happened to be in the company of the white men. They looked with some curiosity at Ree as they saw his blackened face and body, knowing very well what the color signified. And with more than curiosity Ree looked at them,

as the Mohawk made informal introductions. As he shook hands with one of them, he exclaimed:

“Why, it is Black Eagle!”

“Black Eagle,” answered the Indian in a tone of assent.

The surprise of Big Pete and High Horse that Ree should know this strange redman was apparent in their faces, but it was also apparent that Black Eagle did not recognize him.

“How is your son—North Wind—Black Eagle? Did he recover? Do you not remember me? You have not forgotten the night when some one shot North Wind as we were camped at the roadside, far to the east?”

With a little exclamation which, though it was not a complete word in itself, seemed to express more than many words could have done, Black Eagle seized Ree’s hand. Even through the black paint he now recognized the youth who had befriended him and his son.

“Better wash up, boy. No wonder he didn’t know ye,” put in Big Pete at this juncture, and High Horse seeming to believe the suggestion a wise one, picked up a piece of raw deer fat and quite unceremoniously led Ree to the river where he showed him how to use the grease as an aid in removing the black from his skin.

Ree had much to think of as he struggled through his ablutions. Vividly he recalled the night in camp on the eastern border when the first of all those mysterious shots was fired—directed at himself it seemed, though the bullet had struck the young Indian, Northwind. He remembered the determination of Black Eagle to take the scalp of the man who fired the shot, and to take many scalps if Northwind died; and he hurried through with his washing to ask the Indian again whether the young man had lived or died.

“There,” said the savage, pointing toward the blue sky. It was his only answer to the question, but Ree understood—and respected the Indian for his belief that his son’s soul was with the Great Spirit. But from Black Eagle’s manner he saw that the subject had better be avoided, so he inquired what his “red brother” was doing so far west.

“Wah Wah mighty hunter,” was the answer, meaning that he had brought the Indian who was with him into the wilderness in search of game.

Ree doubted the truth of this, as this was not the usual hunting season, but he said nothing. Instead, he asked a question which he dreaded to

put lest he should hear the worst he feared. It was, whether Black Eagle had seen anything of John Jerome. But the Indian answered that he had not; that he and Wah Wah had arrived in the vicinity only the second day before.

The subject of finding John, having thus been introduced, High Horse asked the two other Indians if they wished to bear him company in helping the Palefaces to find their brother.

"There are presents for all who will help," Ree suggested, anxious to enlist the aid of the Indians, for he secretly feared that there would be more fighting soon; and again, the more help, the sooner John—at least some trace of him—might be found.

And there was still another and no less important reason for his desiring Black Eagle and Wah Wah to join their party. The latter was a Delaware and his natural sympathies would be with Big Buffalo. If so, how easily he could betray them all to the cruel Mingo allies the Buffalo had secured! And the enemy would surely be glad to reward such service.

Ree thought most gravely of these things as the Indians hesitated to speak, Black Eagle looking inquiringly at his companion, and then his hopes fell. Wah Wah sullenly shook his head.

CHAPTER V

THE LIMIT OF ENDURANCE

WHEN John Jerome made his perilous leap into the river from the high bluff behind the cabin, he scarcely knew what he was doing. The supreme danger in which he so unexpectedly found himself, forced him to make that move, and down he went like a flash.

No sooner had he sunk in the turbid stream, however, than he began making his way against the current. The weight of his rifle, still grasped in his right hand, helped him to keep the natural buoyancy of his body from carrying him to the surface, and on the river bottom he crawled slowly up stream.

With heroic determination he held his breath, and just as he felt that he must rise for air or burst every bloodvessel in his head, his hands touched the submerged boughs of a tree-top which had fallen into the water. Quickly he crept among the branches, and allowed his nose and distended lips to rise above the rippling ed-

dies of the surface, the water not being so deep but that his feet touched bottom as he did this.

A long time John remained in this position, mentally denouncing himself for having left Ree to fight the battle alone. Time and again he assured himself that he would surely have been killed had he not jumped, but still he felt himself a coward.

At last, making sure that all was quiet near him, the unhappy boy raised his eyes above the water. On the opposite bank were three Indians, but they were gazing down stream and did not see him. They had their guns in readiness, however, and immediately John sank low again, painfully surprised to see how short a distance he had gone, for it seemed to him that he must have traveled a quarter of a mile upon the river bed.

He resolved to remain just where he was until the coast was clear, though he believed he could have reached shore unobserved. The latter course, however, would have resulted in his leaving wet tracks upon the river bank, which might easily be discovered. His decision was a wise one; for the Indians searched up and down the stream with great care, expecting to find just such a trail.

At last came darkness. A heart-sick boy, sorely distressed in mind and body, silently swam the river and crept toward the cabin, which, twenty-four hours before, had been his home.

How changed it was now! From a clump of willows he could see the little log house and its smokeless chimney; but no sign of life was there—no sign of his dearest friend. What had they done with him? He dreaded to go up the hillside lest he should find Ree's body, and prudence told him not to show himself for fear the cabin was being watched, in hope of his return. Still he went quite near and listened so carefully that he was satisfied Ree was not there; then wearily he returned to the water and swam to the western shore.

John's plans were soon formed. By a circuitous route he would go to the village of the Delawares. He would manage to communicate with Gentle Maiden and ask her assistance. She had influence with all the Indians, and might have especial influence over Big Buffalo. Surely she would help him—help him rescue Ree, if his friend were still alive—help him punish the murderers, if he were dead.

Hope came to the cold, hungry, weary boy

as he planned—hope that he might yet save the life which he valued more than his own.

Realizing that every minute was of precious value, John hurried on and on. The darkness and his trackless way over rough ground, and around trees and underbrush and swampy places, made his progress painfully slow. The howling of wild animals added to his utter misery and fears.

All night the boy traveled, frequently going far from the direction he wished to pursue, but at dawn he found himself at the edge of a wet, swampy plain which he knew was near the lake. It afforded him such a hiding place he wished to make use of for a time, and he waded in among the tall dead rushes which thickly covered the whole tract.

Taking care to leave no trace of his entrance to the bog, John felt safe when twenty rods within its borders, and sitting on a tussock, his feet knee-deep in the mire, he spread his buckskin shirt—a garment of his own making—upon the weeds which he crushed down before him, to scatter upon it the soaking contents of his powder horn. He hoped to be enabled to again make use

of his rifle, if the powder would but dry thoroughly.

The patience it required to sit idly by, oppressed by the thought that he might be losing valuable time, and the victim of countless gnats, was, to quick, nervous John, a terrible hardship; but he loaded his rifle at last, confident that the powder would do its part. As he rose to his feet, however, he found himself scarcely able to pull himself out of the bog. A feeling of dizziness beyond description, and of weakness came over him, as he dragged his way out of the swampy place as best he could, and toward the lake.

Poor boy! He was ill in body and spirit, and completely fagged out. In his weakened and exposed condition the poisonous vapors of the swamp had been absorbed by his system as a sponge takes up water. He had been cold while sitting still, now he was burning with fever and his head ached blindingly.

John could not understand it. He had been sick scarcely a day in his life. He did not know how ill he was. He staggered down to the lake to get a drink, and was conscious of seeing two young Indians in a canoe not far away. He was too ill to determine whether they were likely to

be friendly or hostile, so drew back under cover of some bushes that they should not see him. He tried to remember the plan he had formed for communicating with Gentle Maiden, by going directly to the village and inquiring for Capt. Pipe, though he knew the chief was not there. He could think of nothing clearly.

"Oh, I could just lie down and die, if I knew Ree was safe," he whispered to the motionless leaves and the hot oppressive air.

And then a chill came over him and he crept into the sunshine. There he lay scarcely conscious until the fever returned, when he regained his senses sufficiently to crawl toward the water again. A cooling draught revived him somewhat, and he rose, intending to walk around the lake to the Delaware town. He did take a few tottering steps, and then—fell prostrate—and knew no more.

Slipping softly through the dense woods as if fearing to be heard or seen, a shaggy bearded, roughly dressed man, apparently a hunter, approached the lake on the opposite side of which was the town of the Delawares. It was late in the afternoon. A storm was coming on, and the

wind lashed the water's surface into fierce little waves.

The hunter stopped behind some bushes close to the shore and peered anxiously through them.

"It's a goin' to be a pesky dark night, but it will suit me all right," he said to himself, below his breath. "Now what I want to do is lay low till its clean dark, an' then get around to 'tother side an' watch a chance for jest one good shot—I don't want no more. But I'll be blamed! What is that there?"

The exclamation with which the man thus interrupted his own reflections, was caused by his discovering that a few yards to his right, among some tall grass, lay the body of a human being. The figure was that of a man and lay face downward. The dress showed that the person was not an Indian.

"Kin it be more red deviltry?" the hunter apprehensively asked himself, and quickly but cautiously approached the prostrate form. Tenderly he turned the body over.

"Land o' love, it's the kitten!—it's John!"

John Jerome it was, and the hunter's practiced eye quickly saw that he was not dead,

though unconscious. He brought water in his battered fur cap, and sprinkled on the boy's face and forehead.

"I ain't none too glad to see ye, youngster, but it does 'pear that I got along here in the nick o' time. I'm glad on it, but ye'll be upsettin' my plans, sure!"

The lad had not yet regained his senses, but soon his eyes opened. For a little while he stared vacantly, then his face lighted up with the full return of consciousness.

"Tom Fish!"

"Oh, ho, my kitten! Ain't so playful as ye was, be ye? Easy now! Don't excite yourself!"

"Oh, Tom, where's Ree? Where am I?"

"Now be ca'm, kitten." The rough man's voice was soft and kind. "Maybe ye had a sun-stroke?" he suggested. "I found ye lyin' here near the lake."

In a moment John was trying to stagger to his feet.

"Oh Tom, the Indians have got Ree! You'll help me! It was Big Buffalo, Tom,—and Mingoes!"

"Indians got Ree?"

The information threw Thomas Fish into a

state of high excitement immediately, and as John told him briefly what had happened, he could scarcely contain his wrath.

“An’ it was the murderin’ Buffalo!” he ejaculated. “Oh, but I’m a goin’ to give him a dose! Why, I’ve been trampin’ day an’ night jest to give him a pill that’ll put him to sleep! Course I’ll help ye, kitten mine! I come back to these parts a purpose to kill that varmint! Ye rec’lect the scalp he had, John? I to’ ye I knew whose it was, ye mind? Waal, I been to Detroit an’ clean to Quebec lookin’ fer Art Bridges, an’ I’ve found out sure sartin that he come into these parts las’ fall. An’ that settles it! That thar scalp was his’n, an’ Big Buffalo will be a gone goslin the minute I clap my ol’ peepers on him!

“But he ain’t here, ain’t he? Why, I was ’lowin’ to hang around their town till I could get a crack at him. Thought maybe I could pick him off tonight. That’s why I didn’t go near you kittens’ cabin—didn’t want ye to know I was anywhere near these parts; didn’t want the Delawares to know it. Because if nobody knew, why nobody could tell who did it, when they picked that Buffalo critter up deader’n a door nail;

they'd never guess who sent him to Purgatory, ye see! I didn't want to get you kittens into no trouble. But course I'll help ye! Rayther guess I will!"

"Poor old Tom, you have your own troubles, I know, and I remember how mean it was of me to behave as I did when you told us you knew whose scalp that was that Big Buffalo had. I am ever so much obliged, Tom, and we'd better be starting, hadn't we?"

John rose from the seat they had taken on an old log, as he spoke.

"It's going to rain. I felt a drop on my face just now," he said, and started forward; but he staggered and would have fallen had not Tom Fish caught him.

"You an' me will camp the first handy place we come to, kitten," the old hunter said, kindly. "You ain't able to move a step, an' hadn't ought to, by rights. No, ye won't do no sech thing!" he continued, as John protested that he could travel all night. "You're clean played out, an' sick to boot, an' ye've got to rest till to-morrow, or may be next day—got to get yerself fixed up 'fore ye'll be wuth shucks a findin' yer pardner."

Laboriously the man and the boy—boy in years but a man in every other way—plodded on. Before it was completely dark they came to a semi-circular depression in a hillside, partially hedged in by a fallen tree and underbrush.

There Tom called a halt and, making a bed of twigs and leaves for John, compelled him to lie down, covering him with his own blanket, for the lad was again suffering from chills. He kindled a tiny fire close beside the fallen tree, that its light might not draw the attention of Indians, and in a small, handleless frying pan that he produced from the kit which, soldier-fashion, he almost always carried over his shoulder, he brewed a hot drink for his companion from some leaves that he gathered. Having taken this, John felt more comfortable, and then, as it was raining hard, Tom erected over him a shelter of leafy branches supported by low, forked sticks.

There was just room enough for Tom, also, to lie under the protection of the little power, and the strangely mated companions ate their supper as they lay side by side in the darkness of the drenched forest.

As they partook of the dried meat which the hunter's pouch afforded, Tom asked many ques-

tions concerning the attack on the cabin and John's escape. He could not restrain his words of astonishment as he learned the particulars of the fight, and expressed the greatest wonder that both boys had not been killed outright.

Though he had eaten nothing but beech leaves for thirty-six hours, John was able to swallow but little of the coarse food Tom had; but he fell asleep after a time, and his trusty friend, resting "with one eye open," watched over him the whole night through, and so tenderly nursed him with draughts of water and more of the medicine he had brewed, that when the sunlight came at last, sending its cheering beams aslant through the dense foliage of the woods, the boy arose feeling much better. He was hungry, too,—a first-rate sign that he was recovering from his fever.

Tom Fish declared, however, that their camp was in so favorable a place for hiding that they would better rest there all of that day. John's protests were unavailing for a time, but as he continued to gain strength, largely through his own determination, the hunter at last consented to push on slowly, hoping that they might reach the cabin by nightfall and secure, if the Indians

had not wrecked or stolen everything, both better food and medicine than were procurable under their present circumstances.

Slow indeed, was their progress, John being much weaker than he realized, and often obliged to pause for rest. Not until nearly sun-down did they draw near the edge of the clearing in which the cabin stood.

Cautiously they approached and looked searchingly through the bushes at the lonely little house on the hill,—so cheerless and forsaken in its appearance now, that, as the events of the past two days and the great change that had taken place, rushed with terrible force through John's thoughts, tears came to his eyes and he could scarcely stand.

Oh, where was Ree? In the boy's innermost heart had been a faint hope that when he returned to the cabin he would find his chum there, safe and sound. But all was gloomy and deserted about their old home. No one had been near, it was plain, since the battle; and all was so quiet that even the silence, broken only by the splash of the river nearby, added to the despair of the scene presented.

"Oh, it's too bad, kitten; too bad," whis-

pered Tom Fish, deeply touched by John's grief, "but I guess we'll have to go ahead."

Cautiously going forward, they were just emerging from the woods when the hunter's quick ear detected the sound of stealthy footsteps. He dropped quickly and softly on his knee, and instantly John followed his example.

CHAPTER VI

MYSTERIES CLEARED AWAY

“Do you mean that you will not go with us?” Ree Kingdom anxiously inquired as Wah Wah impatiently added “No! no!” and again shook his head to the proposition which Ree had repeated, that he would reward all who helped him find John Jerome.

“No! No!” The Indian said a second time, “Wah Wah go; Wah Wah help.”

“Wah Wah says he wants no presents; is it not so?” put in Chief High Horse.

“Wah Wah goes with Black Eagle, friend of the young Long Knife,” Black Eagle himself announced, making plain what his Indian companion had been unable to express, that he would not go for the sake of the reward.

So were Ree’s fears dispelled, for he knew he could only rely on the redman whose friendship he had won by his attention to poor North Wind. How long ago the night of that mysterious shot from the darkness seemed!

And Ree's confidence returned to him as he learned that all present were his friends. As by common consent, too, being the most directly interested in the work before them, he became the acknowledged leader of the party, almost at once.

"Let us lose no time, my brothers," he urged, and immediately the fire was extinguished, lest it should guide the Mingoes to their trail, and the journey toward the cabin of the young pioneers was begun.

Big Pete was delighted to have Ree in command of the party, being still much in fear for their safety, for well he knew that, should they fall into the Mingoes' hands, there would be little hope of escape. Now that Ree had proved himself not without friends, too, Pete was more than pleased as he realized that the youth—boy though he was—would be able to make good every promise made to him; and well content, he brought up the rear, often glancing back along their trail to guard against surprise, while Ree and High Horse led the way. No sound of pursuers had been heard for hours. It seemed that Big Buffalo and his allies were left far behind.

The sun was disappearing from view below the ocean of foliage which bounded the western

horizon, but long, yellow beams of light still fell here and there, when the white men and their dusky friends crept cautiously forward and looked across the clearing to the deserted cabin. How ghost-like the little log house appeared, high in the open before them, bleakly outlined against the sky, and no sign of life in view! The door was open as it had been left, but no fire-light shone from within, no ray of hope appeared to break the gloom. It was a sad, sad home-coming for Return Kingdom.

"We would better go all around the edge of the clearing before going to the cabin," Ree suggested; "some of those fellows may have reached this spot ahead of us, and we must give them no chance to fire from under cover."

High Horse signified his assent by leading the way. Ree followed, and in this order the party traversed half the distance around the clearing. Suddenly the chief's hand was raised in silent command to halt.

"What is it?" Ree whispered, his rifle quickly in readiness.

For answer High Horse pointed across a corner of the clearing, and, as the boy gazed intently in the direction indicated, he saw a beard-

ed face peep slowly out from behind some brush. High Horse saw it too, and both ducked down.

Again Ree looked and once again the bearded face appeared.

“Tom Fish!”

Forgetting all precaution as he recognized his old friend and shouted his name, Ree sprang forward at a run; and the next minute he was hugging John Jerome with one arm and with the other shaking hands with the old hunter.

More leisurely High Horse and the others of Ree's party followed him, and looked on approvingly at the greetings of the reunited friends, whose embraces and hand-shakings it seemed to them, no doubt, would never be over. Nevertheless these were concluded at last, and then came joyful introductions.

John's surprise was very great indeed, as he recognized Big Pete and Black Eagle, and learned that Chief High Horse was the friend of their own good friend, Capt. Bowen. Neither would he be still with his questions and exclamations until he learned in a general way all about Ree's capture and escape, of which his friend could scarcely tell him for his own anxiety to learn of John's escape, and the most timely return of Tom Fish.

No medicine could have put John Jerome on his feet so quickly as did the happy turn affairs had taken; and now remembering that he was very hungry, he proposed that they lose no time in preparing "a regular thanksgiving dinner."

The whole party soon gathered at the cabin. Its interior had been turned topsy-turvy, but there was dried meat and still a little meal which had not been disturbed, and Tom Fish lent a hand toward preparing a feast. He was not, however, in a cheerful mood, and memory of poor Arthur Bridges seemed to weigh heavier upon his thoughts after his having seen the joyful reunion of Ree and John. Yet he did not complain and with his old-time ability made a rich, delicious soup from dried venison; and being himself hungry, as usual, he urged Ree, who prepared a johnny cake to spread the dough out thin upon the board which served as a pan, for baking the cake before the fire, that it might be ready the sooner. For Tom was really a first-class cook and was always given command in that department.

An unearthly yell broke upon their ears just as the old woodsman had issued this order, and seizing his rifle, Ree leaped toward the door,

where, just outside, John, Big Pete Ellis and the Indians had been sitting. He found Black Eagle rolling upon the ground in greatest fear or agony, and the others gathered around him, excepting John, who stood gazing at a white man standing in the half-twilight near the foot of the hill, apparently doubting whether to approach or go back. It was Black Eagle who had yelled, and now as he looked toward the stranger, he screamed again.

“What on earth——” Ree was exclaiming, when John excitedly, but in a low voice interrupted him.

“It is the fellow who tried to rob us at the Eagle tavern,” said he. “The dirty cut-throat! Shall I tell him to go his way, or——”

The question was not finished.

“Art Bridges—Art Bridges—you ol’ son-of-gun, you!”

Tom Fish who had slowly followed Ree out, went dashing down the slope yelling these words hilariously.

For a minute or two the boy pioneers were nearly as excited as Black Eagle; though why he should have behaved as he did, was quite mysterious. The trembling Indian was soon quieted,

however, as he saw Tom with his arms around his old friend who had returned, it seemed, from the dead; but he looked at the stranger with suspicion and bewilderment plainly written on his face.

Ree and John could scarcely believe their eyes, and felt certain that Tom had made a mistake or had suddenly gone crazy. High Horse and Big Pete looked on with curiosity and interest.

“Ugh! That’s him,” grunted Wah Wah, adding to the mystery.

“No, no!” angrily ejaculated Black Eagle, and drew from a big pouch at his belt, the skull of a man. “No, no,” he cried again, and held the skull aloft for all to see.

What could it mean?

In the meantime Tom Fish was repeatedly shaking hands with the man he had called “Art Bridges,” as they slowly walked toward the cabin.

“There’s some mistake,” John whispered, as he saw the stranger more clearly. “But if it should not be a mistake, I can’t treat that robbing scoundrel from the Eagle Tavern with any decency, even for Tom’s sake.”

“John,” Ree answered, a happy thought coming to him, “do you remember that Tom said this Arthur Bridges had a good-for-nothing cousin named Ichabod Nesbit, who looked just like him? I tell you that Eagle Tavern blackleg must have been he! Tom surely would not make a mistake in a case of this kind!”

“I see it—I see it all now!” John exclaimed. “The man who tried to rob us was Ichabod Nesbit!”

“White men and red brothers, this is my old pardner, Art Bridges, a true friend and a rip-snortin’ warrior,” cried Tom Fish gleefully, as he and the stranger came nearer.

“You are heartily welcome, Mr. Bridges, and I am glad to make your acquaintance, sir,” spoke Ree Kingdom, stepping up to shake hands with the newcomer, who then shook hands with all present.

Black Eagle eyed Bridges as though he were a ghost, and at last went up to him, pulled off the white man’s hat, and felt of and scrutinized the crown of his head.

“Dead, dead,” the Indian muttered. “You be not dead.”

“I rayther suspect not,” drawled Arthur

Bridges with a smile; "but I say, friend, do you know some one who looks like me, that has gone to the happy hunting grounds?"

Black Eagle nodded, and again drew forth from his pouch the gruesome skull and held it toward the speaker.

"Just as much obliged, but I am not hankerin' to handle it," said Bridges with a grim smile. "I'm just as well satisfied that it is not mine," he went on. "Where did you get it, friend?"

Ree and John listened eagerly for the answer to the question, while Big Pete, Tom Fish, High Horse and Wah Wah stood by, no less interested. The Indian shot about him a glance of triumph and savage satisfaction.

Turning to Ree, he said:

"Young white brother knows how in the dark a bullet flew and North Wind died? Yes, in one, two days North Wind died, and Black Eagle put him in the ground. Then did Black Eagle go find trail of man who shot from the dark, and followed—followed long time many, many days. Always, too, did the trail come after young Pale-face brothers—him and him—" turning to High Horse, and pointing at Ree and John. "But

Black Eagle never mind nobody only man-that-shoots-from-the-dark.

“Sometimes he follows trail only as dogs follow wild foxes, then snow comes and trail is like wide path. Then Black Eagle go much fast. Snow goes 'way, Black Eagle goes heap slow. Many days pass; farther and farther trail keeps on, following young Palefaces all time,—and clear up to them one time, and bad man shoots and runs. Comes another day after while and Black Eagle hears same gun again and runs much fast and sees killer of North Wind running away. Black Eagle raises gun to shoot bad Paleface dead. Oh heap bad luck! Gun not go, and man-that-shoots-from-the-dark runs much fast. So Black Eagle runs after him to kill him dead, and killer of North Wind wishes heap much to hide.

“No chance, no time. Far—far—race was run, and then was a fight and Black Eagle kills Paleface wolf dead with his tomahawk. Dead, dead, dead! And took his scalp! Then, with his foot, so, rolled man-that-shoots-from-the-dark down hill like a log, and put stones on him, and Great Spirit never find him there.

“Same day Black Eagle meets the Delaware Big Buffalo and to him gives scalp of killer of

North Wind because Black Eagle goes again to land of many Palefaces and may not carry scalp there. So does Black Eagle go home where North Wind lies and after two, four moons comes Wah Wah and says man-that-shoots-from-the-dark be not dead, but in Ohio country—”

“Him,” put in Wah Wah, pointing to Bridges.

“Like him, yes,” Black Eagle continued. “Like him heap much, so Black Eagle thought was him to-day. When Wah Wah says killer of North Wind is in Ohio country, Black Eagle says ‘No.’ So Black Eagle and Wah Wah come far away here for Wah Wah to see bones of Paleface killed by Black Eagle under the stones where the Great Spirit not find them. And bones be there as Black Eagle told Wah Wah; dead, dead! This is not killer of North Wind,” the Indian concluded, pointing at Bridges; and with evident satisfaction he once more drew the skull of his victim from his pouch, and with a wicked leer displayed it.

“That’s probably that cousin of mine, Tom,” said Arthur Bridges quietly—“Ichabod Nesbit, you know.”

“An’ he got jes what he deserved!” Tom

Fish made answer. "I've told you 'bout some of the tricks he was up to, but I ain't told you how he tried to rob my young kitten friends here, an' how he followed 'em all the way over the mountains and clean this side o' Pittsburg! I see it all now, like a book! Ree, Black Eagle's got the skull of the fellow as shot Old Jerry—that was the horse the boys had." (This to Arthur Bridges).

"Yes, yes, Black Eagle comes just when he shot horse," put in the Indian, interestedly.

"That's jest what ye did, Redskin," Tom answered. "Ye see," he continued, "Nesbit must a' thought our kittens here had a lot o' money, an' followed 'em to rob 'em, an' shot North Wind by mistake. But that wa'n't all he was up to, by Jinks! Know that! He was comin' into this kentry, anyhow, an' he was lookin' fer ye, Art! Yes, he was, an' he intended to kill ye! It was knowed that ye was in these parts; that's why I was so sure that the scalp I seen Big Buffalo have, as I was tellin' ye, was yourn. Now we know what happened. It was Black Eagle who killed Nesbit and gave the scalp to Big Buffalo."

"I had been about here and was at Marietta and Pittsburg during the winter. That's where

our red friend Wah Wah saw me, and told Black Eagle about it, mistaking me for Ichabod Nesbit," said Bridges.

"Ugh!" murmured the Indian referred to, in assent.

"Come men, let's have supper," Ree exclaimed at this juncture, thinking that the conversation might not be pleasant to Arthur Bridges, and the subject was dropped for the time.

John followed Ree into the cabin, as he went to bring out the soup and johnny cake that all might eat outside where it was cool and pleasant, "What do you think of it?" he whispered.

"Why, what we have learned in the last fifteen minutes explains away our mysteries, doesn't it? Is that what you mean?"

"Of course. And to think of that Ichabod Nesbit following us clear from the Eagle Tavern!"

"Oh, but he was after Arthur Bridges, too, and only—shot at us now and then as a pastime, I guess."

Ree smiled just a little gravely as he reflected on their narrow escapes.

"I'm glad Black Eagle killed him," John replied with warmth.

"No, it is wrong to feel that way," Ree was returning, when Tom Fish came in, dancing a jig. John asked him how Arthur Bridges had happened to pass that way.

"He kin tell ye better as me, kitten," was the answer, and Tom in high spirits continued his jig.

"I won't care for more than a hunk of your johnny cake. I had dinner 'fore I quit the Frenchers," said Bridges, as both white men and Indians gathered about the soup kettle. "I didn't tell you," he went on, addressing his words to Ree, "that I have been pilot for more French land sharks that passed by here yesterday. They came up the Ohio and are steering for Lake Erie. They have a plan to gobble all the lands around here if the government will sell it, and, to be honest with you, they intend to put you chaps off your place if they can buy the land. They thought I didn't understand their jargon as they talked about it, but I did, and having no baggage but my old gun, I just quit 'em."

"Mean to put us off?" demanded John Jerome, indignantly.

"I'm afraid they could do it if they succeeded in buying the land from the State," said Ree more quietly. "It is too bad, there is an almost perfect site for a town where the Portage trail and the river meet."

"Buy it yourself," put in Pete Ellis.

"Why not?" asked Art Bridges. "But you will have to hurry. The Frenchers are already on their way to Connecticut."

"We will race them!" John exclaimed.

"We will do our best," said Ree simply, but seriously. "We must save our home."

"I am going to Connecticut myself and Tom Fish goes with me. We can travel together," suggested Bridges, "and if we can do you any good—"

"Ellis is going with John and me," Ree lost no time in saying, "and as we will need to travel fast, to beat the Frenchmen, who will no doubt go in their canoes, by water, as far as they can, and will make fast time in that way, it may not be convenient for you to travel with us."

"Can't get over the ground 'twixt here and the old home none too quick for Art an' me," put in Tom Fish.

"Yes, the Frenchers have canoes and are

traveling in them," said Bridges, "but as Tommy Fish says, we, too, are anxious to reach the east as soon as possible. We can help each other on the way and make faster time, if we are all together."

"We shall travel together, then," was Ree's reply, "and thank you for the offer."

"What is to become of our furs, though?" asked John. "The Mingoes took only a few. We can't leave them here, and if we try to carry them with us, those 'land sharks' will beat us and will have bought our land before we can prevent it! That's what comes of being 'squatters,' " he added, disconsolately.

"There is only one thing that we have not found out," Ree put in at this juncture, lest the strangers should think he and John were complaining, or begging assistance, "who was it that followed us to our camp the night we first reached the river with our goods on the sled? We found tracks next day, you know. Black Eagle tells us how he killed the man who shot old Jerry two or three days before that, and you remember, Tom, some one was spying around the camp the day when you were there alone."

Tom Fish scratched his head.

After a few minutes of apparently deep thinking, during which time he scratched his head a number of times while a frown of perplexity darkened his face, Tom Fish finally spoke.

"That thar varmint," said he deliberately, "was the Big Buffalo varmint. I knowed that for sartin sure the same day I tracked him up. Why do I know it? Well, just 'cause I caught sight on him. That I did! An' that's why I did sech a sight o' picket duty afterward. I was out to get his scalp, that I was. I swan, if he'd 'a' come back into these parts, I'd 'a' fixed him sure! There's no foolin' when once Tom Fish is on yer trail, I give ye fair warnin' right here an' now! But I didn't tell you two kittens 'bout it at the time. I knowed ye had a plenty enough to worry ye. Besides that, ye both knew the skunk well enough to be on the lookout fer him, anyhow. I was sure o' that and that ye didn't need even one word o' warnin' from this old warrior."

"Thanks for your estimate of us," said Ree, a smile on his face for a moment. In fact, what lad would not be pleased to find Tom Fish, skilled frontiersman that he was, thought well of him?

“What he wanted that thar night,” proceeded Tom, paying not the slightest attention to the interruption, “I don’t know. Likely I never shall, either. But of this one fact I am sartin, and that is if he could ‘a’ caught us nappin’ for one single moment, he’d probably sent us all over Jordan, and that would have been the las’ of old Tom Fish and likewise of the two kittens.”

CHAPTER VII

A RACE TO CONNECTICUT

ONE BY one the stars appeared and shone down upon the group of five white men and three Indians whom Fate had so strangely brought together in the heart of the wilderness. A south wind rustled and waved the dark branches of the forest trees, softly the river murmured its gentle songs, and all was peace where so short a time before, had raged a deadly conflict.

"I'll tell ye what we kin do about them skins," said Big Pete Ellis, "an' that's carry 'em right with us to Fort Pitt! Why, Jimminy! I kin carry a wagon load, myself!"

"Jest the checker, pardner!" exclaimed Tom Fish, and Arthur Bridges also gave assent.

"Black Eagle and Wah Wah, too," the former Indian put in.

High Horse did not speak. Perhaps he thought it inconsistent with his dignity as chief to bend himself to labor.

“Why, it would be no trick at all to carry the cabin and a few acres of land with us, and let the Frenchers do their worst, if we had one or two more such friends,” laughed John.

“It is kind of you men, everyone,” said Ree earnestly, “but it is asking too much. When Pete and I agreed to go to Connecticut, I decided we would hide the furs in a cave of which I know, not a great way from here, and leave them until we should be coming west again. Perhaps that would be the better way, for we have no time to lose.”

“A bundle to each man would land all the skins in Pittsburg while you were packing them in your cave,” said Arthur Bridges, and so insistently did the others agree with him, that Ree and John were glad, indeed, to accept their generous proposal.

Thus was a troublesome question easily disposed of, and a little later the sighing wind lulled seven forms to rest—John, who was still weak from his illness, and Tom Fish and Arthur Bridges being in the cabin, while Big Pete and the Indians were on the ground outside; and in the doorway Ree sat with his rifle across his knees. He did not much care now that he had so

many friends about him whether Big Buffalo and his Mingo allies came, or not; and his thoughts turned to other things. As the night wore peacefully on, he planned again and again how he should go about to make Pete Ellis' return to Connecticut as pleasant as it well could be, considering that he was a fugitive from the law.

It was nearly midnight when Big Pete arose and told Ree to get some sleep and he would "Keep his eyes open for Mingoos."

The giant fellow was intensely interested in the return to Connecticut, and anxious to secure an early start. Before daylight he roused all members of the party, and without ado the furs were hauled out and sorted, the most valuable being made into bundles which could be strung over the shoulders of those who were to carry them, and the others, together with certain merchandise, which it was not desired to leave in the cabin, nor yet to take along, safely hidden under the boys' canoe in a great hollow log, high and dry on a hillside a quarter of a mile away.

The sun was not yet an hour high when all was ready for the beginning of the long journey to the east. Articles of furniture and a few cooking utensils were left in the cabin for the use of

anyone who might chance to pass that way in need of a place to spend the night or cook a meal; and for the same reason the latch-string of the cabin was left hanging out.

"It is just like leaving home," declared John, as they bade the little log house farewell, "and in spite of all we have gone through here, I should feel like crying if I thought we were never coming back."

"But we are going to Connecticut now; is every one ready?" Ree broke in, cheerily.

Once again the boys looked back to the little cabin as they and their party passed through the valley and climbed the hillside opposite. Then the trees shut out the view. Everyone seemed in good spirits. Even the Indians entered into the feeling of mutual helpfulness which prevailed, in a manner most creditable. High Horse demanded to be allowed a share of the bundles and shouldered his portion manfully, walking silently beside Ree, for whom he exhibited a fatherly friendship which won him the respect of all that young man's friends.

By his untiring energy, Big Pete kept the whole party in rapid motion. He wished ever to be on the march and he and Tom Fish had sev-

eral friendly tilts over his unwillingness to remain long in camp at any time, or to go slowly, when the old hunter requested it.

Arthur Bridges was inclined to side in with Pete and to make all possible speed. He and John and Ree had become warm friends at once, and the latter having told him what he knew from Mrs. Catesby of the lonely mother who had so long awaited her son's return, the wanderer's only desire was to reach her as quickly as possible.

Black Eagle and Wah Wah were silent as Indians generally are when on the march. High Horse, also, spoke little, but thought much of Ree's invitation to him to continue on to Connecticut and visit the "Mighty White Chief," as he called Capt. Bowen. He also wished to see the "Great White Father"—General Washington—and Ree was truly sorry that it was not in his power to take him to visit the man to whom the colonies and the Indians, also, owed so much.

Only one incident of importance marked the trip to Pittsburg. Near the Ohio river the party came upon a small band of Mingoës, who showed themselves very friendly to High Horse, whom they at once recognized, and talked to him for

some time. They told him, the chief afterward stated, that Big Buffalo had been furious in his rage when he discovered that his prisoner—Ree—had escaped. And when it became known that he had probably had the assistance of High Horse and Big Pete, he was so violent against these two that the Mingoes, among whom were former Mohawks of High Horse's own tribe, turned against him and refused to help him further. Big Buffalo had then left their village without a word.

"Squaw men! Delawares squaw men!" grunted High Horse wrathfully, as he told of Big Buffalo's actions. "Long ago Delawares were made squaw men by the Mighty Six Nations—by the mighty League of the Iroquois—Delawares were forbidden to make war. Nothing might they do but work with the corn and crops like squaws."

It was and is true, that the Iroquois for years compelled the Delawares to pay tribute to them and forbade them to go to war or to fight. This was possible because the Six Nations had conquered that tribe after a long, bitter war, but it was before the time of High Horse and the Delawares were again a free people.

However, for many years the story of the humiliation of the tribe had been told and retold by the Senecas, Mohawks, Cayugas, Onandagas, Oneidas and Tuscaroras, which six nations formed the League of the Iroquois, and they always referred to it when they wished to hold a Delaware up to contempt.

Pittsburg—rough and wild as it was—looked most delightful in the eyes of the boy pioneers as they reached that frontier town and felt themselves again within civilization's borders. There was no trouble in securing the best accommodations the border village, that Pittsburg then was, could boast; for a buyer of the furs was readily found, and with a fine sum in their pockets, the boys felt that they could afford to see that their friends and themselves were well cared for after all their hardships. They secured new clothes, next day, also—frontier garments though they were—and made themselves generally presentable for their return home.

That night as our party sat at supper in the low brick building that then served as a kind of public house, all at once Arthur Bridges began to stare at a man who was rising from the other end of the long table at which most

of the public took their meals. As there were seven in his group, part of them being redmen, Ree had managed to secure a smaller table at one side. High Horse was a chief and had been good to the boys. Black Eagle, too, had been most friendly, while Wah Wah was likewise. Had they all not helped carry the furs, which might have otherwise occasioned the boys more trouble just then than they had time to take? Indeed, both John and Ree felt that, in a measure, they were the hosts of these frontier friends who had, in their various ways, helped to rescue them from the serious troubles in which these young pioneers had become involved.

Ree first noticed Bridges' peculiar manner. Then he looked at the stranger's back, which was all that was then visible as he left the room. It was that of an upright, stocky sort of man, who carried himself more like a man of military training and habit than with the free, slouching, easy way characterizing the hunters and woodsmen most frequently met at frontier posts like Fort Pitt.

"Do you know that man?" Ree whispered to Arthur Bridges as they sat together at the side table. "He looks like a soldier—eh?"

"Know him? I should say I did!" Arthur heaved a sigh of relief. "It's a wonder he didn't locate me while he was eating."

"Why didn't you go over and speak to him?"

"He mightn't 'a' been very friendly." Bridges leaned towards Ree, adding, "He's one of the leaders in that gang of Frenchers. Seven of 'em in all."

"Where can the others be?"

"That is what I am going to find out," and Bridges, having finished his meal, rose from his seat. "It may be they are going overland like us."

"I am going with you," said Ree, and he, too, got up.

None but John had noticed this subdued talk, and he regarded his comrade inquisitively. Neither had the presence of the stranger attracted much attention. John also got up, saying to the others:

"Finish your meal, folks. The landlord will give you anything more you call for. We'll be 'round somewhere."

Joining Ree and Arthur outside, he found them looking down the street.

"What is it, Ree?" he asked, and they both told him whom Arthur had seen and recognized. "One of those fellows that are after our land—is that it?"

"Looks that way," remarked Bridges.

"But I thought they were going by the way of the lake, and so on east!"

"I guess they must have had reason to change their minds after I left," vouchsafed Bridges. "Anyway, they must be here, for I knew that man the minute I saw him. Depend on it, they are up to no good here."

It appeared that Ree and Arthur, on reaching the street, saw the stranger enter a sort of store or trading post. In fact it was one place where the boys had disposed of much of their stock in furs. The proprietor, it appeared, was a French Canadian who had showed considerable curiosity as to where the boys had been, what they did, and where they were going.

"Did you tell him much?" asked Bridges.

"N-no. It wasn't any of his business anyhow." This from John. "But he had a right pretty half-breed daughter that goes by the name of Blue Bell. Her Indian name for it was

so hard to catch on to that I made her tell me what it means in plain English."

"Then you talked with her some while I was dickering with her dad, eh?" remarked Ree quizzically. "I thought you had better sense."

"Shucks! What's the odds? You'd 'a' done the same thing. Yes, I think she took quite a shine to me. She was rather curious, though."

"Was she? I bet she pumped you dry, John." Ree pretended to look disgusted.

"What could I tell her out of the way?"

"Well, did you tell her we had bought land from Captain Pipe?"

"What if I did? She thought we were doing the right thing."

"Say, John," spoke up Arthur suddenly, "did you say you were off for the east to get still better titles?"

"Ye-es. I said we had heard about the French sharpies trying to gobble up all the vacant lands the government would sell."

Poor John's looks were a sufficient confirmation. Bridges turned away with a low whis-

tle of surprise. It told plainly what he suspected and feared.

"John, I didn't think you'd be such a fool," exploded Ree.

"See here!" Bridges was pulling both boys into a vacant space between the ramshackle buildings near which they had been standing.

"Sh-s-sh!" he whispered. "There goes Rantoul," meaning the stranger. "Isn't that Pierre with him?"

It turned out that both Ree and John recognized Pierre, the Canadian fur dealer, proprietor of the store and father of Blue Bell, the fascinating half-breed daughter, who seemed to have gotten the best of John's discretion.

Both Rantoul and Pierre were now approaching along the street. Bridges drew the boys still further in the shadow while the pair passed. When they started to go Ree found that John was no longer with them.

"Why—where is—where has John gone?"

"He'll turn up all right," said Arthur. "I think you gave him too much of a dig just now. Perhaps I can help mend matters. I'll watch out, and get Pierre off for a talk. He knows me well. I've done him favors when I

was here before. But I want to keep shy of Major Rantoul a bit. If he sees me we may have trouble."

"You understand, Arthur, that what we want to do is to leave here as soon as we can. We must get on east before Rantoul and his bunch get there. If you know Pierre, do some pumping yourself. Meantime, if I can find John, we'll keep away from you, so that Pierre won't suspect anything. Pity John was so free with his tongue to that girl. No knowing what she won't do or say to her father or—or the Frenchies."

"Watch out, Ree! I believe that's Pierre coming now. You slip off and let me tackle Pierre." The two separated, Ree going around by a back way and returning to the tavern.

Meantime what had become of John?

After his sudden illumination from Ree and Bridges that he might have been indiscreet in his talks with Blue Bell, John felt within himself a growing sensation of disgust.

"I ought to kick myself, if I could," he thought. "I didn't mean any harm."

Just then, as the two men passed up the street, apparently in close converse, a sudden

idea came to him. He acted upon it instantly by slipping swiftly away towards the rear and making a hurried detour towards Pierre's trading store. Reaching his destination, he saw with satisfaction that the back door was wide open. A light from within shone through, giving John a view of the half-breed daughter seated on a bundle of furs and busily engaged upon some task with a needle. Apparently there was no one else about.

Without ceremony John found his way to the front, pushed open the store door and entered, shutting the door behind him.

"How, Blue Bell!" he exclaimed as he came forward. "I feel that I am in great luck. I came in to see if my—my friends were here. But I find only you. You are my friend, are you not?"

Blue Bell looked up a moment, then lowered her eyes. When she looked at the boy again she smiled as she held out her hand.

"Yes—Blue Bell your friend. Yet I know you only so short a time."

Clearly the girl was pleased. Very attractive she looked in her half Indian, half white girl costume, her dark hair neatly braided down

her back, beaded moccasins on her small feet, neat calico and homespun dress, with strands of beads depending upon her bosom. Still more attractive was the way she regarded John, who had never thought much about the effect his own masculine comeliness might have on such maidens as—Blue Bell for instance. True, he recalled that the Gentle Maiden back in the Delaware village had looked his way in a manner not unlike that of Blue Bell.

But John was a modest boy. Always he had regarded Return Kingdom, his comrade, as one to whom others, male or female, would naturally turn first. But it was impossible for him not to see that the present opportunity gave him a chance to rectify more easily the indiscretions he had committed according to both Rée and Arthur Bridges.

Incidentally the two, being alone and at an hour when few would be apt to visit the store, by look, gesture and word melted into the soft, sweet mood inspired by the time and the place. Without hesitation the girl suffered him to take her hand, listening the while to his rather crude compliments, while John cudgelled his brains as to how and where to begin. He

strove to put himself upon such confidential footing as would make Blue Bell unhesitatingly promise secrecy upon that which he had told her scarcely two hours before concerning the plans of himself and Ree, what they had already done and what was to be feared in consequence of his thoughtless blabbings.

“Blue Bell,” said he boldly at last, “I like you. Do you like me?”

“Y-yes. But you are white. I am only part white.” Already the color question was sufficiently disconcerting to trouble even young minds among those who, like John and Blue Bell, were more used to the crude refinements of civilized life than the average run of frontier folks along the border. “It would not do, would it?”

This almost took John’s breath away. Truly Blue Bell was a deeper one than he had imagined. He felt confused and consequently hesitated.

“Why—er—what has that to do with our being friendly? Come! I like you, Blue Bell. I told you some things to-day I ought not to, I reckon. I don’t want you to say anything to others about what I told you.”

“What do you mean?” The girl regarded him coldly, as if taken aback by his apparent failure to follow up the lead she had so patently given to his previous announcement that he liked her.

John was not very astute in the artful trivialities of converse, where two of the opposite sex approach each other in the way to possible friendship, perhaps intimacy. He felt vaguely vexed with himself and also with her. Why could she not respond?

“I mean just this, Blue Bell. You were asking me about what we were going to do, what we had done and where we had been. I chattered away thoughtlessly. My friends do not like that I should talk so freely even to you. For some people, already here, are on the way to take away the land we bought from the Delaware Chief Hopocon.”

“What do you want me to do?” The girl was direct enough now. “I have already told my father. My father wanted to know. Why, I do not understand, except that he is very friendly with M’sieu Rantoul.”

So the mischief was already out! John felt again like kicking himself. Meanwhile Blue

Bell, prettier than ever, owing to a half wistful expression that crept into view despite her more outward aspect of indifference, regarded him mutely. Her dark eyes were limpid, almost dewy, as if tears lay not far below. Suddenly she placed her hand again in his, squeezing it with a fervor that somehow made John feel better.

“You—bad boy—perhaps,” she began. “But Blue Bell still likes you, though you talk ’bout things I care for not at all. Have I done you any harm? Am I not your friend? I see you when you first came here on way to Delaware country. I ’member you. I not forget you. I do now what you want me to do. Is that enough?”

“Surely! I could not ask for more. If your father is friendly to the Frenchies, do not tell him more about my folks.”

“He sure like French. He is French himself, though he live in Amerique. You say you like me. Well, we trust each other. It is the only way.”

Here there came a noise at the front door as if some one were about to enter the store.

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT HAPPENED TO JOHN

IN another minute two men entered. One was Pierre the trader and the other Rantoul. At the same instant two men, one an Indian, appeared at the rear door which was still open. The second man, a French Canadian, was of the usual hunter type. One thing John instantly noted; both carried their rifles. The savage, evidently a Mingo, naked to the waist but for a ragged mantle of dressed deerskin depending from one shoulder, glared evilly at the young couple in the store.

Pierre, striding forward, glowered at the youth angrily. He was usually smiling and rather debonair, but showed little of his usual courtesy now. With an emphatic gesture he waved Blue Bell from the store, saying:

“Get you gone!” This gruffly.

Without a word the girl obeyed, disappearing through a side door, but casting a back-

ward glance at John as she disappeared. Turning to the lad, the storekeeper frowned still more heavily.

"Why do I find you here, in my place, with the front door closed and alone with my daughter?" he demanded in still gruffer voice.

So different was Pierre now from the urbane trader who a few hours before had tried to beat Ree and himself down in the prices of their furs that John saw at once something vital was wrong somewhere, somehow.

"Why I—I just happened in," began the youth, but was well aware of his own lack of competent subterfuge. Pierre apparently had him in a corner. Of course he could not confess what he had been conferring with Blue Bell about. "No harm in my being here, is there?"

But here the stocky, military-looking man intervened by drawing nearer as he remarked to Pierre in perfectly good English:

"Let me attend to this young man, Pierre. It was fortunate that your back door was open and that he was seen when my men passed by with his brother."

"My brother!" exclaimed John, now more himself again, for he began to feel that there

were things happening too much out of the usual to be pleasant or even endurable. "What was he doing back here with your men?"

"That you will find out in due time. Meantime you must also go with me."

"Go with you? Why?" John drew back towards the counter, where he noticed that there was the usual set of counter scales, with loose weights in a rack. "Just what do you mean? I do not know you."

"But I know you; and also your brother. You have occupied lands to which you can show no legal right. Will you go peaceably or must we use force?"

Rantoul spoke calmly, resolutely, and with the assurance of one who has carefully measured the surroundings accurately. His manner did not belie his appearance. By this time John had reached the counter, and while facing the military man, one hand carelessly thrown behind him, had grasped one of the iron weights. And now he said quietly enough but with emphasis:

"No, I won't go with you. I do not know you, I've already said. Let me out of here! I want to go to the inn!"

While John was speaking Rantoul made a furtive signal to the couple at the rear door who had been standing there watchful, waiting. Immediately they sprang inside, while Pierre made a reach for John, who easily eluded the trader's effort, keeping his eyes fixed mostly on Rantoul, who he perceived seemed to be at the head of whatever was going on.

"Keep off, all of you!" exclaimed John. "I don't know what you're up to, but I do know my rights. Keep off, I say!"

He edged along the counter towards the front, still keeping his hold on the iron weight. Pierre, the Indian and the hunter followed, while Rantoul, keeping to one side, urged John to give up peaceably.

"Give up?" declared the boy. "What do you think I am? Keep off—"

Here the Mingo and the hunter, followed by Pierre, made a rush. John now bumped the door, which he saw was locked, with the key probably in Pierre's pocket. As he turned back, facing the others, he saw that he had but one chance.

Three of his assailants were on the point of laying violent hands on him, while Rantoul,

refraining from actual violence himself, was urging them on. Seeing that he was in for it, John hurled his weight not at Pierre or the other two, but at Rantoul himself. It struck him fairly in the side of the head, felling him to the floor.

This created a slight hesitation among the others, who seemed astounded at the audacity of the action. John, turning, dashed through them for the back end of the store, only to find that that had been mysteriously closed.

Meantime he heard two of the others coming, for Pierre had stopped to assist Rantoul to his feet if the latter was able to rise. What should John do next? The situation, though in Fort Pitt, was even more critical than when he had met the opposing savages at the rear of their cabin and had to take to the river. Just then the side door through which Blue Bell had vanished reopened slightly and the girl's face appeared. With a meaning look and smile she pointed one finger at the rear door, smiled quickly, and then the side door closed.

All this in an instant as John, in full flight, was passing. Without halting, the boy kept on, finding that the door, though closed, had been

slyly unlatched and, it might be, also unlocked, for the door catch was self locking. Thanking his stars that Blue Bell must like him a little bit in order to do him such a favor, John burst through the back door into the darkness outside.

With rare presence of mind he slammed the door to behind him, hoping that it would relock itself, which it did. As the lad retreated he heard the crash of his pursuers as they brought up against the closed door.

Dashing along in the darkness, he heard oaths and ejaculations inside, which became less audible as he placed more distance behind him. Once again he thanked fortune that Blue Bell had shown such signs of real friendship. But—was it only friendship that had caused her to reappear so unexpectedly and point to him the way out? Had she, indeed, after being made to leave the store by her father, seen to it that the back door was kept unlocked? Take it all round, John rather congratulated himself that he had made so favorable an impression on the half-breed girl, who was not only pretty and well dressed, but had as much intelligence as

usually went with the average white maidens along the frontier.

One thing that now disturbed John more than ever was what he had heard concerning Ree. What was Ree doing, passing by at the rear of the store in company with Rantoul? Was not Rantoul at the head of the party of Frenchers trying to obtain control of the very lands which he and Ree, together with other Americans, were trying to settle on themselves through amicable dealings with the Indians? It looked very mysterious. Perhaps they had Ree a prisoner. John would have ridiculed this but for the evident attempt of Rantoul with others, including Pierre, to forcibly restrain him.

“I can’t see into this, but I must find out somehow.” So, as a first chance, he returned to the inn, where he found none of his party but the three Indians, sitting stolidly in a corner smoking and—John feared—drinking of the “fire water” then much in vogue at all frontier taverns.

But none of them had seen or heard anything of the white members, except that Bridges

had returned some time before and had talked aside to Big Pete and Tom Fish. Where he had gone or for what High Horse, Black Eagle or Wah Wah did not know. Later on Tom Fish and Big Pete had slipped out.

“Be back by-m-by—guess,” remarked High Horse, whose eyes showed signs of incipient drowsiness. “Ugh-h! We smoke, eat, drink. Nothing else to do.”

After seeing that nothing was to be learned here, the boy concluded to look elsewhere.

“Guess I had better get my gun,” he said to himself. “I may need it.”

Going to the loft where they bunked, he took his rifle, powder-horn and bullet pouch, and also stuck in his belt the hunting knife he usually wore. Then, passing into the street, now quite dark except for the lights in the shacks and other buildings along the main street, he took his way towards the river, peering into various stores and other places where there was likelihood of people being within.

Perhaps this curiosity, inspired by the hope of seeing someone he knew, or other members of his own party, made him careless. At any rate, as he was passing an unusually dark cor-

ner he bumped into a fellow he knew slightly, whom he had met in the town and who had been quite friendly.

"Why, hello, partner!" this personage said, as the two drew back. "I was jest lookin' for some one I knew. You'll do as well as any one. Come on!"

But John drew back at once. He was now quite cautious.

"What is it you want?" he demanded.

"Jest wanted to have some one to talk to. I'm lonesome in this darn town."

"Have you seen anything of—of my brother? Or the rest of the whites in our party? We're stopping at the tavern. But they've gone out somewhere."

"Oh, they're jest knockin' round, I guess. Come on; I know some fellers as wants to go on east. Mebbe they'll join you; make your comp'ny bigger; less danger of gettin' into trouble."

As this seemed a good idea, John went along with the fellow, who seemed to be one of those vagrant hunters then to be met at every frontier village or trading post. So the two soon turned into a side street where the darkness

was greater than ever and the mud-holes less apparent until one stepped squarely into one. There were vacant spaces with low cabins here and there along the way and scarcely a light to be seen. Finally the buildings ceased, though the ripple and purl of the nearby river could still be heard. Here John's suspicions became aroused and he halted, saying:

"Where are we going, anyway?" Just then he remembered that he did not even know the man's name. "I hardly think any of my party would be out here."

"Just a leetle further, friend," remarked the easy-mannered hunter. "Them fellers I spoke of be stoppin' right out in the aidge of town where they found a shack that was vacant. Better go in and see 'em. I'm satisfied they'd like to j'ine ye, and thur's no harm in seein' 'em. Come on!"

Yielding, though not with alacrity, John followed the other, meanwhile loosening the knife in his belt and throwing his rifle into a handier position for use should occasion arise.

"See thar?" the man pointed at a dim light down the sloping road. "That's whar they be."

So John followed along a gradual slope across the vacant area, where a few giant forest trees still raised their branches high toward the heavens, until they arrived at a low shanty built of poles with partially chinked spaces, through which gleams of a smouldering fire shone forth.

The man tapped on the door. To John it sounded like a peculiar knock, but it aroused no further suspicions until the door opened and the man, standing aside, gently pushed John forward.

Inside were perhaps a dozen men, all of the usual frontier variety. This would have occasioned no concern by the boy but for one thing. Seated on the dirt floor, with his hands tightly bound behind him was some one, evidently a prisoner. His back was towards the door, and the inefficient light did not disclose more to John. But the sight of the bound arms was enough.

John started back, but the man who had enticed him thus far gave the lad a vigorous push, saying to the others:

“Here’s the other feller! Watch out! He’ll bite!”

Instantly the men inside sprang up, though the prisoner remained still.

Just as John himself was about to be assaulted, he saw what he did not detect before. This was that a stout stick thrust perpendicularly down the prisoner's back held him forcibly in one painful position.

With his rifle John shoved back the first two, and tried to back himself against the wall. But the man behind suddenly seized the boy, attempting to get him round the waist, thus pinning his arms. But John with a vigorous twist squirmed loose, and strove to aim and use his gun. But by this time the others, except for two guarding the prisoner, seized the rifle, grabbing also the boy's legs, and in another minute had him down, where as many as could helped to disarm him and otherwise make him helpless.

Strange to say, though these men were all armed, they did not use their weapons, or try to beat the boy into submission. All they did was to strive by the use of overwhelming force to make him physically helpless. This accomplished, his hands bound behind him, he was

held against the wall at an angle that enabled him to see who the other prisoner was.

Imagine his astonishment and concern when he saw that it was Ree!

CHAPTER IX

REE AND ARTHUR ALSO ARE GREATLY SURPRISED

WHEN Return Kingdom separated from Bridges after they had seen Pierre go by, he returned to the tavern. Bridges, following Pierre, saw the fur trader meet Major Rantoul and after a moment of secret converse go down the street together. Cautiously Bridges followed. Just before reaching Pierre's store Arthur, who had not kept much of a lookout behind, was suddenly seized by three men, dragged into a vacant side lot, then bound and gagged almost before he knew what was happening to him. He did not shout at first, for still his dread lest Rantoul see him was uppermost. He figured that such discovery would hurt their chances of leaving for the east, for he was thinking no less of his friends' desires than of his own safety.

Scarcely had he been rendered helpless than

who should come along but Rantoul, then on his way to rejoin Pierre, owing to some understanding between the two. The truth was that Rantoul had returned to the tavern only to settle the bill for his party for the time they had been in the village. Then he left and presently rejoined Pierre where both entered the latter's store as we have already seen.

It so happened that when Ree came into the tavern he was seen and recognized by Rantoul, for most of the Frenchers had seen our party of adventurers when they came into Fort Pitt. It seems Rantoul, after that first sight, had carefully laid his plans. He did not intend that these boys should return to Connecticut in time to defeat the plans of himself and his friends to gain from the state control of the lands in the Western Reserve now so much being sought by incoming settlers, that they were dealing with the Indians for a first right to their farms, meaning later to do the same thing in a different way with the government at Hartford.

Rantoul kept out of sight, settled his accounts at the inn, then left hurriedly to post his own adherents who were stationed near by. This done, he hastened on to meet Pierre who

had waited for him near his own store and home.

Thus it happened that, through this careful provision for coming events, not only John but also Bridges was secured as has been described.

Ignorant of all this, Ree met Tom Fish, who was at the corner table with the Indians, smoking and drinking. So engaged was he with his friends that he did not see Rantoul at all, who took particular pains to keep his presence at the inn on that night unknown to our party of adventurers.

"Come on, boy!" shouted Tom, who was already somewhat exhilarated by what he had drunk. "A nightcap of hard cider won't hurt ye."

"No, Tom. You know I indulge but very little."

"Wal, then try a leetle o' the rum. That's what me and High Horse have been samplin'. It'll knock the blues cut'n your head, boy. It sure will!"

"Tom, you know me. I'm awfully obliged, but I won't drink. Wish you and High Horse, Black Eagle and Wah Wah all the good luck

in the world. I've got to do a little scoutin'. See here!" He drew Tom aside.

"You know that fellow we saw here when we first came? Well, he is the leader of that bunch who are out after our lands. Bridges knows him. He's hot on our trail and aims to get to Connecticut before any of us do. If he succeeds, he'll be in a position to oust us or make us pay three or four times what we'll ever be able to pay for those lands for which we have worked so hard and so long. I'm afraid he's got something else up his sleeve. And I want to watch out for what they're going to do. Whatever it is, we mustn't let them leave here ahead of us, and we've got to head them off somehow, if they do."

"All right—all right. You're up to snuff, son. That's plain to be seen. I'll loaf here awhile, then I'll go see what's become of Arthur ef he don't come in soon. Say he was with you?"

"Yes. He and I saw Rantoul and Pierre, the chap we sold most of our furs to, go up the street together. Then when Pierre came back alone Arthur followed him. I haven't seen him since."

“Well, I’ll wait here a bit. Then if he don’t come back I’ll go find him. Won’t do for us to go back east without Bridges. Lord knows I’ve spent time enough huntin’ for him! Go on, lad. I’ll see you later. I’ll tell Pete; he’s loafin’ somewhere down street.”

So the two separated. When John returned later Tom had gone, probably in search of Bridges. Meantime Ree, following a side road, was about to return to the main street when he too was suddenly seized from behind by some dark forms and despite his desperate resistance borne to the ground. So hard did he fight that they were compelled to use rougher methods than they intended, for a final blow from the butt of a pistol knocked the boy senseless. Upon his recovery, he was led, still half dazed, down along the rear of the buildings, past the trader’s store where his captors, being on the alert, saw John inside conversing with Blue Bell.

Once at the hut, which was the temporary rendezvous of the party, Ree recovered sufficiently to make another desperate attempt to break through and regain his freedom. But the odds were too great. At last he was bound,

seated with a stake at his back, and entirely helpless. Even a gag was in his mouth. And so he remained while they waited for Bridges.

Arthur Bridges, it appeared, was wanted by these adventurers simply because he had deserted them without giving notice when the whole party were, so to speak, lost in the western wilderness. Rantoul had been unable to forgive this. He wanted Bridges back again simply to show the man that such things could not be done with impunity even in the western wilds with such men and such a leader.

Men who could afford to deal with a state for tens of thousands of acres of rich virgin lands were not so to be trifled with—more than once at least.

But the “best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley,” we are told by one of the greatest of old world poets. In the case of Arthur Bridges, these old-time gangsters had to do with a man quite as adept in sly tricks and bold rushes as they were, perhaps more so.

Scarcely had Rantoul left Bridges and his captors than they were suddenly confronted by Tom Fish, who met them as he came from behind a pile of barrels and boxes, recently emp-

tied by dealers and cast into this rear area. Tom wasted no more words than was necessary.

“Turn that man loose!” he ejaculated, and some element in his voice or words, backed not only by the levelled pistol but the gleam of a huge knife in his hand, was too much for them. It is one thing to jump on a man from behind, three to one, but quite another to face one armed and ready like Tom was just then.

The men turned Arthur loose at once. Tom tossed them a smaller knife.

“Pick up that knife, loosen his gag and his hands, and be quick about it, too! This here gun is mighty light on trigger. Git a move on—durn ye!”

Much to Arthur's surprise and perhaps to their own, Bridges was a free man in less than a minute. Without speaking to his friend, Tom advanced on the trio, his gun still levelled, his knife plainly visible.

“Drap them 'ar rifles and leg it out'n hyer? I'll give ye ten seconds!”

They went, nor did they look behind until at a safe distance. By this time neither Tom Fish nor their late captive was visible, not even

in the moonlight which had been increasing as the half moon rose higher in the east.

Sullenly they returned to the shanty near the river to report their experiences. By this time both Rantoul and Pierre had returned, the former going boldly inside while Pierre, after one look at the captives, turned away and returned to his own place. He was only in a half good humor. The plan, whatever it was, had been but partially successful. True, they had secured the two boys, whom Rantoul and his men were most anxious to capture and retain, but Bridges, whom Rantoul and the other Frenchies were most desirous to secure because of his desertion of them in the Ohio wilderness, had somehow escaped.

Why was Pierre so interested in the plans of this coterie of Frenchmen? For two reasons. First he was a French Canadian himself, which in those days meant being French with much local bitterness added, for the antagonisms then existing between the French colonials and those of British extraction were very bitter indeed.

Second, Pierre himself expected, should Rantoul's party succeed in securing State titles

to all this grant of Western Reserve lands, to benefit largely by it himself. These lands would soon be colonized, largely by Yankees from the east, also many French Canadians drawn hither by the French ownership of said lands, and prices would naturally go up. Pierre as well as the others would consequently be much better off financially.

He sought out his daughter Blue Bell and began to berate her at once.

“What did you mean by meeting that young fool in my store after I had gone away? Was it nice—or—or modest?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” returned the daughter. “You left me to keep the store. If anyone came in I had to be nice to them.” Here she flared up in a way quite unusual when with her father. “He is no fool, father! And he was very quiet and well behaved until you and Major Rantoul with the others came. I don’t see how I could have behaved different—do you?”

“Yes, I do! You had no need to sit there talking with a stranger. But, mind you, I shall keep an eye on you! You are not full white, Blue Bell, and when young white men approach

you it is your duty—to me—to keep them at a distance. Remember that!”

The girl gave no answer, but the idea troubled her. She did like nice young white men to say nice things to her. So did Gentle Maiden, Chief Hopocon's daughter, who was all Indian, having no white blood in her veins whatever. Blue Bell knew her, for more than once the Delaware chief's daughter had visited Fort Pitt with her father. Both had been to Pierre's trading store a number of times. The utmost friendliness characterized the intercourse on both sides, and occasional barter had ensued. Gentle Maiden had invited Blue Bell, when her father visited the Delawares, to come with him and see something of real Delaware hospitality. And Blue Bell had resolved to go; that is, if her father would take her. But that was still in the future.

But now something distasteful had entered the half-breed girl's mind. She wondered if she and the Delaware girl should again meet, if she would feel friendly as before. Was it the tinge of white superiority with which living amid the whites had affected her? Blue Bell did not know or care. One thing she did know,

The young white boy was nice; yet somehow she did not like the notion that Gentle Maiden should be nice to him or he to her. Why? That is one of the shadowy complexities which at times control the minds of girls, be they white, red, or any other color.

Meanwhile, after Pierre's departure in came the disgruntled men without their rifles, to report their lack of success in the affair with Bridges. Rantoul, listening, now came forward, seeing that only two captives instead of three had resulted from the carefully planned raiding groups that had dogged their intended prey. Meanwhile he was listening to the yarns of the three disarmed men.

"Go back and get your guns!" exclaimed the major angrily. "I thought you had some real grit. Why didn't you jump on this fellow? You were three to two, with one of the two bound and gagged. Mon Dieu! And I thought you were real men!"

He wheeled and turned to the captives who, despite their struggles, had not only been gagged but were being blindfolded.

"We must get them out of here at once." Rantoul spoke in a sort of mongrel French, then

much current upon the border where French, Americans and Indians were more or less constantly commingling. "Four of you, fully armed, take them to the boat. The rest of you follow me. We will make one more effort after that wretch Bridges."

In obedience to this both Ree and John, now helpless, silenced, and blindfolded by kerchiefs tightly swathing their eyes, were led forth, and soon reached the river bank, where they were hurried into a waiting dugout, evidently of Indian manufacture, and paddled a few yards out into the stream. There lay one of the old-style house-boats, then much in use by the adventurers who had already begun to descend the Ohio and its upper branches into the yet unsettled wilderness farther west.

It was useless to struggle. John managed to get alongside his comrade, and pinch Ree's arm with one pinioned hand. Ree hunched him gently in return before the two were rudely separated.

Meantime the three disarmed men straggled back after their guns, which were lying where they had been dropped. Of course they were gone before now, they had reasoned, and

there was no enthusiasm in their movements. Instead, they were commenting upon Rantoul's dictatorial manner, always distasteful to men used to frontier methods.

"Gosh!" exclaimed one suddenly, "I'm git-tin' tired of this! But the pay is good. No use kickin'."

"Good pay! *Bonne foi!* We keep the faith. That ees the main thing. Then we deserve the pay—eef we get it." This from a Canadian hunter, one of the group. But upon reaching the spot where they had dropped their guns, what was their surprise to see the three rifles lying where they had dropped them. It was amazing. Almost instantly it looked vaguely suspicious. What should they do? Boldly reclaim the guns, or hesitate? Caution is intuitive upon the frontier when things are made suddenly plain—too plain, in fact.

As with a common resolve they stepped up. One of them stooped to pick up his gun when there came sharply a single word, brought so tinglingly to their ears that, as one of them afterwards said, "Hit was wuss than a crackle of bullets."

"Halt!" All three stood up straight,

looking, wondering, not unlike suddenly startled children. Three men moved out from behind the pile of store refuse, guns in their hands.

"Let them guns be!" continued the voice, that of Tom Fish, on either side of whom stood Big Pete Ellis and Arthur Bridges.

"Well," said one of the other trio, "them be our guns. Why can't we have 'em: that's what we'd like to know?"

"'Pends on what ye want to do with 'em. What was you fellers doin' with my friend, here," indicating Bridges, "when ye had 'im gagged and tied fast? Explain that and mebbe we'll let ye have them guns."

"Well, if ye must know, some of my friends wanted him. He left 'em 'way back in the big woods when he was under contrack to act as guide. Left 'em without a word, or a by-your-leave!"

"I reckon you knows the reasons, don't ye? Your friends, as ye call 'em, was aimin' to steal a lot of good lands from them what had already settled on farms they bought fairly from the Delawares. Why, I says, did ye go and do that?"

The question was a poser though most, if

not all, probably knew the whys and wherefores of these late proceedings in regard to land acquisitions in the Western Reserve. Tom snapped a disdainful finger in the air, though this did not keep him from keeping his rifle in readiness for instant use.

“You tell them Frenchers as ye’re workin’ with they be a sorry lot. We’ll see to it that they don’t make nothin’ out of that deal. ‘Member that?’”

Tom surveyed the three with scornful eyes, then he added: “Come, now! What ye loafin’ round here for? Pick up them guns of your’n and git out’n here afore we plug ye from the rear, jest whur ye ought to be plugged.”

The men hesitated, but hearing the crack-crack of locks as the trigger hammers were drawn back, the three hastily picked up their guns and started to leave. One turned a moment and sent back this warning in plain frontier English:

“You’re doin’ the blowin’ now; but—you jest wait! Hear me?” He snapped his fingers in disdain, then followed the others.

Tom watched them until they vanished towards the river. Then he remarked:

"We didn't really want thur guns. They'll need 'em in the woods. But—laws me!—that feller was pertty sassy, wasn't he?"

"Yep!" This from Big Pete. "I'm git-tin' dry. Le's go back to the tavern. We kin tell the boys what we've been at."

But when they finally reached the inn, late as it was, neither John nor Ree had returned. High Horse, Black Eagle and Wah Wah lay curled up in blankets on the floor of the room allotted to our party. But they had not seen either the boys or anyone else since the last of the five whites had gone out. That only three returned did not disturb them much, however.

"They'll turn in afore mornin'," remarked Tom.

"I hope so," said Arthur. "But why did them chaps try to kidnap me?"

"'Cause you served them such a trick out in the woods. Them French are a 'vengeful sort of folks. What's the use to bother? I'm sleepy."

Even Big Pete, forgetful of his desire for a drink, lay down and was soon snoozing away.

CHAPTER X

THE KIDNAPPING

WHEN morning came the places in the room reserved for Ree and John were still vacant. The first one to discover this was Arthur, who lost no time in letting the others know. Tom rubbed his eyes sleepily. Then he, too, got up, giving Big Pete a gentle tap with his foot. While the three were dressing the matter was discussed pro and con.

At last High Horse sat up amid his blankets.

“Better see what gone with that big man with beard on upper lip. Rantoul—I know him. He no friend to white mans what trying to get land from redman. Ugh! See if Frenchers still here.”

Then he turned over and lay down again. Wah Wah and Black Eagle snored on, for their liberal indulgence in fire water the evening be-

fore made them more sleepy than usual. Bridges looked at Tom, then:

“Remember, Tom, Rantoul was after me—I know that. But for you I would now be in the same fix as our two young friends, if not worse. I am inclined to think that High Horse is right.”

Presently the breakfast call came up the stairs and the three whites descended to the dining-room where the other guests were gathering. But there was no sign of Major Rantoul or of the others composing his party, who had hitherto been quite prompt upon the summons for meals. Catching the eye of the landlord, Tom beckoned him to approach.

“What has become of those Frenchies that was here yesterday?”

“I dunno. I’m too busy to keep track of folks stopping here after they have paid their score. I reckon they’re somewhere about.”

“Did they pay up in full for what they owed?”

“None of ’em paid a cent. And yet their score was paid. What ye want to know for? They owe ye anything?”

At first Tom was inclined to speak the

truth; but when he looked at the innkeeper's rather crafty face he sought refuge in subterfuge. "Well, yes. They owed us considerable. I 'lowed to see 'em this mornin'."

"I hearn one on 'em sayin' they was fixin' to leave the Fort. But I didn't know where to or when. Have another fried egg?"

When the man came with the replenished plate Tom leaned towards him confidentially, saying in a low voice:

"Thar was fellers in that party of Frenchies that did us rather a mean trick last night. I won't say what it was but it wasn't fair or square. By the way, you hain't seen them two boys with us? They haven't run in for breakfast, have they?"

"No, nor the Injuns either. The boys was about off and on endurin' the evenin' but I hain't seen none of 'em sence. Injuns was drinkin' right smart. I hopes they'll settle afore they leaves." This rather anxiously.

"Oh, yes. If they don't, we will. Say, you've knowed me fur quite a spell. If them Frenchers have gone, who would be apt to know most about it all?"

"You go and see M. Pierre, the fur dealer.

He was thick with them chaps; most especial long with Rantoul."

"Think he'd know about the boys?"

"Dunno; he might. He and Rantoul was always confabbin' together. Anyhow, if I was you I'd see him. Pierre's all right, but he's rather a sly coon."

Tom took this advice, and about an hour or so later he, with Ellis and Bridges, went down the main street to Pierre's trading store.

When the Frenchman saw them come in he shoosed his daughter into another room through the door whence she had signalled John. Tom heard him conclude with:

"Now you stay right there. You've got lots o' work ahead. I'll take care of the store."

Having shut the door, he turned smilingly to the three whites, saying:

"Glad to see you, gentlemen! What can I have the pleasure of doing for you this morning?" Then he smirkingly added: "Nice fine day—very!"

In a few words Tom explained what they wanted to know, both as to Rantoul and his men, then as regarded the missing boys.

Pierre at first was all sympathy, but there

was an unsatisfactory gleam in his eye that Tom noted, or thought he did. Was old Pierre trying to fool them?

"See here, Pierre," said Tom at last. "You're from Canada. I don't blame you Frenchers for stickin' together, 'specially down here among all us Yanks. I ain't worryin' so much about Rantoul, but I *am* uneasy about those boys. You know 'em. Two Connecticut kids right from my own home. They didn't come in last night, and they haven't come into the tavern this mornin'. One thing makes me suspicious. My friend Arthur, here, was taken from behind, not far from the back of your store. What they'd have done to him I don't know, but I happened on them about that time."

Pierre looked his surprise, but at the same time his eyes failed to meet the others. He feigned some business appointment. He really must go. If there was anything he could do, why—he would be most pleased indeed. Then he shook his head enigmatically and strove to leave. At this Tom, much discouraged, turned sharply on the trader with:

"Look here, Pierre! Kidnappin' is a dangerous thing, even out here. If them Frenchies tried to kidnap Arthur here, against whom they had a sort of grudge, why shouldn't they try the game on them boys? They wasn't much pleased with them, either, on account of some land deal."

"Gentlemen—messires all," here Pierre made a sweeping salutation, "mooch as I would like to please you by news which I have not got, you moost excuse me. I moost really go."

There was more remonstrance, but Pierre, having made up his mind that he had nothing to tell, withdrew to a cubby-hole of an office where they could see him making ready apparently for the street. Disgusted, Arthur turned towards the rear of the store, and was surprised to see that side door pushed open about six inches and a comely, dark face peering forth and a small hand beckoning at him furtively.

By this time Tom and Pete were confabbing in a corner. Instantly Arthur slipped back to the side door, where he confronted Blue Bell, whom he knew slightly. Without waiting for further greeting she began in a half whisper:

"I know what you all want. It is news of those boys; one he name Ree, one he name Joohn. Eet iss so?"

"Yes, yes! You're right! What is it you know? Is it what we want to know?"

"You sure you friend to Joohn—and his brother Ree-e?"

"You bet we are! So is Tom. I, too, was held up by men I feel sure were part of Rantoul's party. If it hadn't been for Tom Fish," pointing to Tom still talking with Pete in one corner near the street, "they would have got me. Rantoul doesn't like me. He didn't like the boys either. I am afraid—don't you think they might have been carried off somewhere—"

Here Blue Bell tapped him on the shoulder, whispering:

"My father be out in minute. Yes, Joohn was here las' night. But my father help. He friend of Frenchies: my father French himself. They take Joohn here. He throw weight at Rantoul. Make mark on his face. Joohn, he fight hard. He brave; much brave. But they too mooch for him. They come in, start to carry him off. I unfasten this door. Joohn see my signal. He break through them, get out

at back door. After that I 'fraid they get him —look out—”

She suddenly shut the door, while Arthur coolly made as if he was trying to light his pipe. He saw the fur-dealer emerge from the small office with hat and coat on and look about inquisitively, particularly at Bridges slowly approaching and trying to light a stubborn pipe.

“I must go out, messieurs,” said Pierre politely. Bridges walked past him coolly, a growing dislike of the Canadian contending with a warmer feeling for the pretty girl, who had volunteered just enough information to make it clear to him that Rantoul was more shrewd than Bridges expected. Doubtless last night’s happenings were the openings of a scheme more complex than had been supposed.

Not only was Bridges to be punished, but these others in some way. By combining all operations, Rantoul and his fellow speculators, if successful, would have had their obstructors at their mercy, whatever they had intended to do with them. Talking with Tom later on, Bridges said:

“I don’t know what Rantoul wanted to do

with me. Perhaps have me scalped by some rascal among those Indians who are dirty enough to do his bidding. He must have wanted those boys out of the way too—no doubt of that!”

“If he has carried off those boys, he dare not detain them among the whites around here. They must be taking them somewhere out among the Indians.” Tom shook his head. “But how? That’s for us to find out—hey?”

“And where?” Arthur added. “Thanks to you, I got free. Thanks to that pretty girl of old Pierre’s, we’ve got pointers enough to help us to get more. What do ye think, Pete?”

Big Pete, always more a man of actions than of words or planning, merely grunted a vague approval, concluding with:

“I’m with ye. Whatever you two agrees on goes down with me—sure thing!”

After that the three pursued a quiet but persistent round of visits to all sorts of places in that new-old settlement, which at this time was about the most important place along the Ohio border. Here one might see people of all sorts, boatmen from the river, French voyageurs, trappers, hunters, men of French, Eng-

lish, Irish or mixed extraction, while others were silently coming and going from the various adjacent red tribes, both north and south as well as west.

In those days what is now the Middle West was largely a region of mystery or semi-mystery where exaggeration and fanciful invention might run riot in the imagination of a people sufficiently acquainted with the actual perils and wonders of such parts of this wilderness as they had really visited. There were Min-goës, Shawnees, Delawares, Tuscaroras, and other tribal names that among the whites were synonymous with just such experiences as each had undergone during the brief or lengthy period when in actual contact with a life and region as yet largely unfamiliar to the great world outside.

At last Tom himself unearthed a weather-beaten boatman, Ricky Skree, by name, who gave him some pointers.

“I was comin’ up from the river that night when I met a squad of men. Faces sort of muffled, for thar was some moon. They had someone that looked to be young, a kind of boy. I didn’t see what he had on, or if his hands was

tied. Tell ye the truth, they was so crowded together I couldn't tell.

"But my cur'osity was up by then. I says to myself, 'Suthin' wrong thar or I ain't no sinner!' After they passed, a notion got me. Ever let a sudden notion git ye? You've jest got ter foller it—or bust. I didn't want to bust, so I follered that notion and it took me 'hind that squad down to Grimes's wharf, which ye knows ain't much more than a few planks stuck out over the water, up in the aidge of the settlement." Ricky pointed in a certain direction.

"Well, what next, old chum?" This from Tom rather impatiently.

"Go easy, comrade. Time's allays cheap. Well, then they got into a dugout layin' at the wharf and they had the lad with 'em. Then I noticed that his arms was tied. He didn't look any too ready to git into that boat, but they sort o' squdged him in anyhow. Then they paddled out a piece and I seen 'em all climb into one of them river flat-boats—you know 'em." Tom nodded. "Says I to myself, 'Somethin's up. What be it?' Havin' nothin' else to do just then I loafed round, keepin' sort o' out'n sight for mebbe an hour or more. Then

down came another squad, and they too had a boy along. That thar dugout then ran in and took this second party out. I dursn't git too close. I knowed now thar was somethin' doin' that wasn't proper. But I got as close as I could.

"One of them chaps had marks on his face like he'd been swatted hard. One of them boys had thick black hair. He was bigger'n t'other. Both of 'em was likely lads though."

"Well, what did they do then, after taking the second load out?" asked Tom.

"Nothin' much fer a while. I was gittin' tired; 'lowed I might as well go about my own business, when all at once that flat-boat up anchor and began to drift downstream. Pretty soon they began to use poles and oars."

"Say, friend, you're all right," began Tom. "I reckon you didn't recernize either of them boys, did you?"

"I ain't so sure, but I 'low now as I did. I'd seen 'em afore."

"You have, eh? Well, who were they?"

"Well, sir, I seen them boys when they fust passed thoo here months back. Two well-set-up chaps both; pleasant spoken, too. I

think they were goin' west, lookin' for land. But they was rayther close-mouthed about that."

"Yes, that was thur way," commented Tom. "I knows 'em. Thur comrades of mine, and I guess those that has 'em now are up to some deviltry with 'em, owin' to that land they had got. You know Rantoul, that Frencher that is so thick with Pierre, the fur trader?"

"I've seen him a time or two. Last time I saw him, 'bout two hours ago, he had a mark on his face like he'd been hit."

"One o' them boys did that, and got away for a spell. But I guess they got him later. Know what I'm goin' to do?"

Ricky Skree shook his head enigmatically. Tom took a huge chew of twisted leaf tobacco, then continued:

"I'm goin' atter them boys; that is, me and some of my friends. If I was sure they was goin' down the river, I'd cut across the neck here and foller 'em. But fer all we know, they may leave the river at the big bend and strike out west towards where them boys have their home."

Ricky looked interested. He thought a bit, then:

“That flat-boat I’m sure was pretty well loaded. Thar couldn’t ‘a’ been more’n eight or ten aboard. She must ‘a’ had a cargo of somethin’ else; things to trade with, I reckon.”

“Say, Rick, you got a river boat, hain’t ye?”

Rick nodded, adding:

“I got a good one, ef I do say it. What you want to know fer?”

“Come on! Mebbe my crowd could hire you for a few days; or, for all we know, a few weeks. How does that strike you?”

Ricky expectorated, then shook his old head.

“Can’t go myself so fer or so long. I’m liable to get a contrack from a lot of surveyors, workin’ for Gover’mment. Might last months—good pay.”

“You come along with me. Take dinner with my crowd. Ef you knowed them boys you know hit ain’t right they should be carried off that way. I got a friend—Arthur Bridges. They was atter him, too. But for me they’d

'a' had him. I'm tellin' you straight, old man."

At mention of Arthur, Ricky's hesitation vanished.

"I know Bridges—good friend of mine. Know him long time. Do most anything I can for Bridges. Him and me—we—he do me big favor once. Help me buy my boat. He just in from big trip with land hunters. Have money."

"Come on, then, old man. I want you to talk with Bridges. We got another man—Big Pete Ellis. Know him?" Ricky shook his head. "We got three Indians. Know High Horse, Black Eagle, Wah Wah?"

At mention of High Horse Ricky nodded yes, more interest showing in his sharp, red, wrinkled eyes. After that Tom had it all his own way and soon was leading Ricky towards the inn.

On the way they saw Rantoul emerging from Pierre's store. Tom's face hardened. He would have liked to confront the man then and there, but felt rightly that just now the time was inopportune. It might disclose Tom's intentions and thereby put the Frenchman more upon his guard, for Tom had no doubt but that

this crafty major—was he really a major?—might be at the bottom of this atrocious kidnapping affair.

CHAPTER XI

THE PURSUIT BEGINS

Two days later a small party of hunters left Fort Pitt early in the morning. They were afoot but fully armed, while each carried the usual supply of ammunition, cooked food and other impedimenta customary when the journey was not to be very lengthy, at least without replenishing the food supplies. Meat and fish were always accessible to any who knew how to shoot or hold a baited rod. But corn-bread or meal was also essential upon long journeys.

There were five only in the party, three of these being redmen. Crossing the river near where the Monongahela and Alleghany unite, they plunged into the wild forest that then clothed what is now a densely populated region. Heading towards the southwest, they traveled sometimes along a beaten trail leading in that direction, and at times leaving this as its course changed, or to avoid a too circuitous angle.

They trudged along at the easy, half-slouching gait practised by the thorough old-time wilderness dweller when on a journey. Perhaps it was well that they were practised frontiersmen, for like the Indians themselves, the two white men exhibited all the skill, caution and elusiveness that constitutes the born woodsman, red or white, whether in peace or war. They can stalk the deer, or still hunt, with the same skill they show in eluding or attacking the foe. In fact they are masters of a sort of craft and daring that is not much seen now amid the whirl and confusion of modern life.

At a certain turn of the trail the leader—no less than our friend High Horse—turned to Tom Fish, saying:

“Time to get look behind, brother. I think I hear sound far—far off.”

After a moment of consultation Black Eagle, his rifle in the hollow of his arm, slipped through the bushes, disappearing towards the rear. The others trudged on with the same celerity as before.

“Where do we strike the river again?” queried Big Pete presently. “At the place we app’inted?”

"That depends, old feller." Tom Fish shifted his rifle to the other shoulder: "If we don't find any busybodies pryin' round, I would say yes."

"What do you think, High Horse; and you, too, Wah Wah?"

Wah Wah merely grunted non-committally. The other redman deliberated some time in silence. Finally he looked to the right where the trail again struck a straight line, as he said:

"Wait for Black Eagle. He may know."

"What did you hear, High Horse? I was listenin' as well as trampin'."

"White man ear no good for wood sound when wood have something to say."

He trudged on without further remark. This was not very satisfactory, but just then they spied Black Eagle, who was coming into view, and at a half loping pace, showing that he was in a great hurry.

"Looks like he had news," remarked Pete heavily.

Then the scout who had been sent to the rear to see if prying busybodies from the Fort were haunting their trail, merely took his place

in the file and mushed along much as if he had never left it. High Horse grunted.

"Come, Black Eagle." This from Tom, half impatiently. "Open up a bit. Tell us what you know."

"Heave ahead, brother!" spoke up Pete, biting off a huge chew from his twist. "Why all this thinkin' bee? Out with it, good or bad."

Black Eagle grunted, then turning to Tom Fish, said:

"Two men in the bend, pushing through the bushes. Both look like hunters. I not know 'em—yet. One have swelled face like he been fighting. Then I come away. They follow—keep out of sight. Ugh! We all watch out, but we get on fast—fast."

So it was. Two men were following, doubtless from those who were in some way opposed to what Tom Fish and his friends wished to do; that is, to find and rescue the two white boys who had been so unceremoniously carried off.

It may be noted here that both Big Pete and Tom carried slung across their backs an extra rifle each, together with the powder-horn and bullet pouch that went with the hunter's

ordinary equipment. Tom had instigated this by mentioning that the boys had left their guns behind. At his suggestion, both Pete and himself had voluntarily thus loaded themselves.

“Ef we git to them lads, it may be whur weepens a-plenty’ll be lackin’. We’ll have to see the boys has something to fight with if fightin’ has to be did. We’ll mould some bullets and fill thur horns with good powder. What d’ye think, Pete?”

Pete thought about the same as Tom and both burdened themselves accordingly. By hard marching the party finally arrived at a village of a dozen or more log cabins built near where a small stream emptied into the Ohio River. Although they did not know it, they were upon the spot where, in after years, the city of Wheeling was to grow and flourish. But the hour was late and all were tired.

Without troubling to find a lodging place they made camp in the near-by woods, and so passed the night. Bright and early Tom was up. He roused Pete, and the two, leaving the Indians to more leisurely prepare breakfast, made a brief round of the river front, then a mere fringe of straggly forest, thick with un-

dergrowth, except at one spot where a short wharf or pier of roughly hewn logs projected just far enough into the river current to afford a landing place for the crude river craft of that day.

Not a boat was in sight. Along both banks of the river the almost unbroken line of forest extended, with an occasional floating tree trunk of some uprooted forest denizen of the wilderness that had been gradually water torn from its soil to become flotsam of the river tides.

“Looks like Ricky ought to be round somewheres with his flat, don’t it, Pete?”

“Hard to say. But we got ter keep a bright lookout. Rick might turn up when we least expect. Lemme stay here and keep a lookout. You go back to camp and git your breakfast, Tom. Then either come back yourself or send Black Eagle, and let them keep an eye out.”

“All right—I will. Reckon I’ll go thoo the village, and find out if anybody has seen or knowed of that thar craft what must ‘a’ passed with the boys. Ye knows, Pete, from what we heard, I guess thar’s no doubt but that them rascals as has ‘em are bound farther down.”

“To my thinkin’ hit’ll be one of them loose

bands of Mingoes that them fellers are in cahoots with. One feller told me that them Frenchies, after Bridges left 'em, colloqued a sight with Big Buffalo and the kind of red rapscallions he'd nachelly be in with."

With this understanding the two separated, Big Pete keeping out of sight himself, yet remaining where he would have a clear view of all that went on about the rickety wharf, the river shores and the river itself. He had not been long at this and was thinking of lighting his pipe, when two men came down the trail from the near-by cabins, walked out on the wharf and took a look up and down the river.

Pete recognized them both, but he remained out of sight, merely watching them while they strolled about in the open a moment, then quietly faded from view in the direction of the trail leading eastward toward Fort Pitt.

Before Pete had time to consider things, Black Eagle appeared. With him were High Horse and Wah Wah. Evidently the early departure of Tom and Pete that morning had been noted by the redmen, who without breakfasting more than to gnaw upon strips of dried

venison which formed the unvarying part of a wilderness outfit in those days, had followed on.

"How!" exclaimed Pete. "Didn't look for ye quite so quick. Tom went to let ye know that we was on watch here."

The Indians grunted, their usual acknowledgment of another's speech. Then Black Eagle pointed in the direction where the two white men had just vanished. He shook his head soberly.

"Same ones I saw yest'day on our trail. Goin' back Fort Pitt."

"What ye mean by that?" queried Pete eagerly.

"Found all they want to know. Why stay?"

"Then ye know 'em, do ye?"

Both High Horse and Black Eagle nodded yes.

"Huh! Reckon I kin see through a knot-hole, too. Hit was old Rantoul, with a guide. Wanted to find out if their boat passed here all right. Now he's goin' back to the fort."

Both the Indians nodded, while Wah Wah,

looking up-stream, showed signs that he, too, was on. High Horse, with a grunt, supplemented this.

"They seem to go back—but will they go?" He shook his head negatively. "Mebbe want to keep out of sight, then strike for more down river." He turned to Wah Wah, saying further: "Brother, you follow. We wait for you in village. See where those white men go."

Without a word Wah Wah obeyed, when Black Eagle also took up the trail.

"We eat 'nough; we follow. Wait for us. You, too, Tom Feesh."

"Wait," called High Horse, fingering for his pouch of parched corn and dried meat. "We eat in village again. You need food—plenty."

And he made his red comrades add to their own stores by taking some of his. Then he turned to Pete.

"We go up to village. Find Tom. Then we eat. Our boat come by soon. Wah Wah hear something. He know."

Again it was apparent that the redmen's superiority to the whites in detecting signs of hidden approach or concealed propinquity

might once more be vindicated as it had the day before.

So High Horse, giving one long look up the river, turned and with Pete was about to leave the river front when they saw Tom approaching them on a dog trot, followed by two or three village idlers who, from a higher position at the head of the one small street, had also sensed what Wah Wah had already divined. All were halted, however, by the sudden appearance round the near-by point of a flat-boat which was making for the rickety wharf.

Wah Wah and Black Eagle had already disappeared in the woods as they tracked the two white men.

"Thar she is," called Tom, as the others joined him at the wharf. "Look! Ef that ain't Ricky at the steerin' oar I'm a sinner."

"Yah, and thar's Bridges," exclaimed Pete, as Arthur's head and shoulders showed above the gunnel railing of the flat, which was probably forty feet long by ten or twelve in width, with a half roof over one-half the space, while enough deck was left on either side so that one might walk safely. At either end was

a wider deck space, where two long oars were suspended each on sturdy pivots, and operated as steering and guiding methods. At present the forward oar was held out of the water by lashings, the stern oar, manipulated by Ricky, being used to direct the boat's course, while the river current itself furnished the momentum.

In a few minutes the flat was tied, and the two boatmen were ashore, greeting their friends and fraternizing frontier fashion with the curious ones from the village, who seemed to greet both Ricky and Arthur as if they were old acquaintances. Meanwhile Tom was talking to Big Pete and Arthur as chance permitted.

"Yes, siree. We're on the right track. That other boat went down yesterday and they wouldn't let nobody on board. That looked suspicious, didn't it?"

"Well, rather. But did no one catch a glimpse of the boys?" queried Arthur. "How long did they stay?"

"Only about an hour. The flat didn't come to the wharf at all. Two men, both Frenchers, came ashore. But from the wharf, folks here

say they saw four or five men, some white, some red, goin' about aboard. Once they saw a young feller's head peepin' out over the gunnel right where the roofed over part stops. From what they said I guess one of the boys must 'a' stuck out his head for a minute. But he seemed to be jerked back, all at once."

"Was that all you learned?"

"I didn't say that." Tom winked shrewdly. "In plain truth, thur actions was so durned queer that, about dark, two fellers got into a canoe up above whar that creek comes out, and paddled down."

Pete growled impatiently as Tom winked, then broke into a lusty hee-haw kind of laugh, while some one in the gathering group broke in with:

"If you won't git on, Tom, I will. Hit was me and Tip Tate. We reely had been fishin' and had a dozen or more good river cat in the bottom of our dugout. Well, when we got just above whur the flat lay, anchored with a big rock, I p'tended to lose my paddle. That is, she dropped overboard."

"I know," broke in Tom hurriedly, anxious not to be denied the privilege of telling it his

way. "You lost your paddle; had a string tied to it, didn't ye? Then you yelled fer them on the flat to reach over and ketch that oar. Of course they couldn't, or didn't. Which was it, Rod?"

"Oh, I dunno. But what I did see and know was that a couple of youngsters, mere boys they was too, riz suddenly up. Thur hands was tied and one of 'em started to yell something."

"One of 'em had black hair, t'other's hair was lighter," interposed Tip lustily, as the other paused. "Before you got your paddle back them boys was yanked down, while two or three more fellers, white and red, lined up along in front and hollered for us to git back. Which we did, seein' they all had guns and seemed to want to use them too."

After that the talk cooled off, somehow, while Tom, having thus half told his story, which the other two had spliced out, nodded convincingly. After that there was no doubt in any one's mind but that this flat which shortly went on its down-current way, was the one the uncommunicative "Frenchers," who had that morning left, were looking out for.

"No use for us to stay here longer," re-

marked Ricky, when our party had gathered together on his flat to await the return of Black Eagle and Wah Wah.

“Guess you’re right, Rick,” remarked Pete. “What we’re after is to ketch up with them boys and git ’em outen the scrape they’re in. I’d like to jest put my hands on that thievin’ crew.”

So, while they waited, Tom hurrying back to the one small store for one or two minor articles which might be needed, met Tip Tate as he was returning. Tom eyed him quizzically.

“I reckon you’re givin’ us that yarn about seein’ the boys straight—hey?”

“What ye take me for? The black haired one looked as if he had been thumped pretty heavy on the head. Yes, sir. And you’re goin’ atter ’em?”

“We are, friend. And, believe me—we’ll foller ’em if necessary to hell and gone but what we’ll get ’em. That’s straight.”

“Wish ye good luck. But you look out for them loose bands of Mingoos. They’ve been lopin’ about through the woods down Marietta way a good deal. More’n that, I’ve heard that they are in snooks with them Frenchers as makes Fort Pitt thur headquarters. Dunno

nothin' much 'bout it myself. But that's 'bout what we hears from folks passin' round here of late."

About the time Tom returned the two Indians were emerging from the forest and making rapid way towards the flat-boat that now lay close to the shore. Most of the settlement stragglers had returned to their cabins. When Tom and the others got aboard, the flat-boat was pushed off and began to drift with the current down the stream.

CHAPTER XII

JOHN FINDS A KNIFE

WHEN our two lads at last found themselves helpless aboard the big flat-boat and drifting down the river, the world—their world—looked dark and dreary enough to them. Bound hand and foot, and for a time tightly gagged, there was little they could do but try to cheer each other up, as the boat drifted on down the four mile current, while the tramp of many feet assured them that their kidnappers were overpoweringly in force. Even if they had been able to free themselves, it did not seem likely that they could make much headway against so many.

Their limbs ached, for their bonds had been tied cruelly tight. Their faces ached for their gags were most uncomfortable. Would they be kept in this state of uncomfortable bondage indefinitely? Moreover, in Ree's case the punishment he had received in the struggles he had

made rendered his pain almost unbearable, when the gag and bonds were considered.

Perhaps an hour or so elapsed. Then there came one of the men, who gruffly asked them if they would behave in case the gags were loosed. Both nodded.

The aches and pains were almost insupportable.

"Mind ye now—you two," continued the man, who in look and manner had all the worst traits of the old time French Canadian voyager and trapper of the north. "You got yourselves in this scrape by interferin' with our plans and the purpose of our boss."

While speaking he was taking off the gags, and loosening the bonds securing their arms.

These bonds, however, were not removed as were the gags; but they were somewhat relaxed, so that the youngsters could stretch their arms and relieve the general physical tension, and otherwise take a breathing spell to make ready for what might next happen to be in order.

"One thing you two must understand," the Frenchman spoke sternly, his sharp, close set eyes narrowing still more; "of course you don't like this a leetle bit. It ain't nachel ye should.

But you're in our hands. As long as ye stay in our hands, you must be good. If you don't be good, we won't be good either. You think you've been treated rough. Well, we had to be rough to get away with ye."

"What does it all mean anyhow?" blazed up John, unable to keep still. "Don't you know you're making yourselves liable to—to—"

"Ease up on that, boy," interrupted the man. "We're not under your thumb; you be under ours. Big diff'rence in that."

"Where are you taking us to?" demanded Ree.

"That's our business, boy. What you've got ter do is to go easy; that is if you want us to let up on ye in any way that will make you more comfortable."

Then he left them.

"Oh, Ree—what can we do?" moaned John despairingly.

"Nothing that I can see now, but to keep our eyes peeled and watch out for any chance that might happen. Maybe we might get hold of a knife. Then, in the night, while things are quiet we might free ourselves and jump overboard."

“And swim ashore?” John was panting under the thrill of the idea.

“Swim, dive or do something to free ourselves.”

“They’ll never give us the chance!” John was pessimistic. “Do you know what I think? I feel sure those Indians with the whites here are Mingoes.”

“You may be right. There are too many scattering bands out here, and they have very little idea of what is right, except it be something more to their advantage than to yours and mine. They will—”

Two tall dusky forms in moccasined feet were stooping under the low roof that covered half the body of the boat. They were bearing rough platters of bark on which was fried fish, some dried venison, and cups of hot weak coffee. They were redmen and under the dim light their features, smeared with war paint that had half melted under the heat of the day, looked almost demoniacal. Placing the food on the floor within easy reach, they grunted gutturally and were about to withdraw when Ree spoke up.

“I want a drink of water first; can we have it?”

"Ugh-h!" began one. "What you want? Fire water? No have."

"I didn't say fire water, but just water—plain water. Do I get it?"

"Dunno. Have to see head man." And the couple vanished, much as they came.

"Well—I declare!" Ree looked disgusted. "I am thirsty."

But as nobody returned, the boys finally set in on their crude supper, finding it most palatable despite the lack of water. The way they were now bound they could stretch their limbs and recline more at ease.

But for the inevitable anxiety as to their present situation and the drear uncertainties of their immediate future, the night might have been one of comparative comfort. They were left alone as the boat floated with the current, though they well knew that guards were posted at the opening to the unsheltered stern part. Their quarters were cramped, for various boxes and packages containing they knew not what encumbered much of the roofed over part.

Just beyond they could half see the legs of the reclining bodies of some of their captors,

while others tramped the deck overhead. In the morning, upon arriving at the village later called Wheeling, they were variously disturbed by the halt and the wait there, while the skirmish before described so aroused them that they tried to make their presence known.

The result was harrowing, because of its unsuccess. After that they were rebound more tightly as the boat continued to float on down the muddy river.

The day passed drearily. Water was given them at times, and also food, but no more coffee.

"I wish we were out of this," more than once John had sighed. "Anything would be better than such hole as this, fixed as we are."

It was not Ree's habit to complain. He endured in silence. By saving the fat from a rind or so of the fried hog meat that was once brought in, he greased the sore places on head and face and rendered his pains a little more bearable.

When night arrived the course lay nearer the Ohio shore. Far into the night they ran slowly on, finally entering a narrow string of wooded islets with tortuous channels between,

through which the muddy current rippled along monotonously.

Far in the night one of the boys woke up. All was still, the darkness intense. A slow swinging motion that was different from the forward glide of the craft during the day, aroused John's attention. From the stern outside sounds of heavy breathing could be heard. Doubtless on the deck at stern or bow there were wakeful eyes and ears on the alert. He knew the enemy too well to doubt that. But—where were they? Had they come to the end of their journey by the river? Or were these people waiting here for some ulterior purpose, unknown and unpenetrated by the prisoners? His spirits ebbed at the uncertainties of their position. What were these people up to anyhow?

There came a slight stir and a slight rustle from the outside, including the faint sound as of a paddle stroke. Then came a bump against the side of the flat-boat.

It so happened that this interruption to the weary monotony of the night's silence came from quite near that part of the cabined recess where the boys were passing the night. John,

vaguely wanting to find out something, somehow, he hardly knew what, eased his body along between the huddle of stuff confusedly piled under the roofing; eased it silently until at last his head touched the side of the flat.

Right outside, within a foot or two of where he lay, he heard some one ask guardedly for tobacco.

"Lost my bag somehow," a voice half whispered, half spoke aloud. Had John not been so close he would not have understood.

Then a guttural sound from the deck overhead rumbled something. Then:

"Never mind. I got a few scraps in one pocket."

Then came the noises of dumb rustlings, and a scrape of steel. John knew that the party outside was lighting his pipe laboriously, after the fashion of the time when matches were unknown, and there was no kindly fire or hot coals nearby. Then the low voice again.

"Go—wake up Lenan," it said. "We got ter come to some understandin'."

The movement overhead, once resumed, continued shufflingly as the cause of it receded

towards the rear of the flat. After a few moments of liquid river lappings and the muffled rubbing against the side of what John supposed to be some kind of dugout canoe, there sounded the soft pat-pat of moccasined feet on the side decking and a relaxing grunt, as the owner of the moccasins must have sat or crouched right over John's head.

"Hullo, Padgett," a low voice said to the occupant of whatever craft was alongside. "Where'd you spring up from?"

"Where'd je s'pose? I'm at the place we agreed on, ain't I? Well, hit's mighty nigh a bust up with them Mingoes. They want a show down."

"Show down of what they're goin' ter get, or what they think they ought to get for sech a job as this?" Padgett grunted. Lenan continued:

"You mean they want to be sure that they will receive what the major promised them in case he found it needful to turn any prisoners over to them."

"They also want to know what they're to do with them," said Padgett.

"I don't care what they do with 'em. They can take 'em out in the woods and kill 'em for what I care or Rantoul does, either."

"Is the major that sot ag'in 'em, Lenan?"

"He shorely is; but he has got to sort o' keep that to himself, and let it out only to them he knows. He's got a couple of young fools here who have already given him trouble, and will give him lots more if he don't get them outter his way. Thar was one more we hoped to get, but it missed fire somehow. Great pity, too; for he's the chap what left us in the lurch off in the big woods, when we was runnin' a most important survey. But we got them two, and we don't want 'em comin' back to bother us ag'in—see?"

There was a short silence, during which John's pulse beat faster than usual, because of the vaguely sinister import of what he heard.

"A couple of young fools," he thought. "That must be us. The fellow they didn't get must be Bridges. What next?"

Finally the one overhead began again.

"What do they want to do, or for us to do, more than we're doing?"

"Well, for one thing they first want to be

sure that they are going to get the goods for their work, whatever it is. The blankets, beads, hatchets, powder, lead, and all. How kin they feel sure?"

"They're right here aboard this boat. More than that, they's half a dozen each of pistols, rifles with plenty of ammunition. What else would they have?"

The man called Padgett appeared to consider within himself. "All right here, hey? And two prisoners as well? I hope you got 'em where they won't get into mischief with all those things so handy like."

"Don't you worry. What do you take us for? The only time they get their hands untied is when they eat. Wait a minute till I fill my pipe."

The pipe needed cleaning. Lenan brought forth his pocket knife, and proceeded to clean out the pipe-bowl. In so doing, some mis-stroke caused the knife to be flipped from his grasp. It bounced on the decking, and finally went through an empty hawser hole, now disused, and vanished from Lenan's sight, likewise from his touch.

Fortunately the pipe would draw, and in his

desire for a smoke he let further search for the knife rest. It could be attended to later. Padgett, from his seat on the boat, heard the fall.

"What's the trouble?" he called up softly.

"Nothing much. Say—what do you or they want me to do?"

After that some more silence, as Padgett pondered the situation. At last he cleared his throat with a rumbling effort, while above Lenan filled his pipe. Then John heard Padgett scramble up the side to the deck above.

"Fust, I want to see some of them things you say you've got stored here," said Padgett. "Then I'll be able to tell them Mingoes what they want to know."

"All right," replied Lenan. "Now's as good a time as any. Got your boat tied? Well, come along and don't make too much noise."

John, below, heard them scrambling aft towards the open part of the flat. He knew he must get back to his old position. As he turned he felt something under him, and reaching forth his loosely tied arms felt a knife. It must be the one dropped by Lenan. With hasty movement he managed to get hold of it, close the

open blade and shove it inside his shirt, where the waistband of his trousers held it secure; that is, unless John was stood on his head, a procedure not likely.

Aft, he heard the stirring of sundry sleepers as Padgett and Lenan hunted for the stub of a candle to stick in the lantern Lenan had already found. After more grumbling among the sleepers, red and white, they secured the candle, laboriously lighted it, and began crawling forward under the sheltered part of the flat.

Meanwhile John, returning to his place beside Ree, was feigning sleep when all at once Ree woke up. John nudged him, whispering in Ree's ear:

"Lie still, Ree. It's important. I've been listening. I found a pocket knife. Sh-h-h! Two of 'em are coming to look over these goods stored here. Make out you're asleep. You must, Ree."

Ree, at the news of a knife being found, had made a move to get up, but John pulled him back, whispering as above. Ree was quick to grasp the situation. He sank back, simulating a muffled breathing, while John did the same. Meantime Padgett, a big, scrawny, bearded chap,

and Lenan, with straggly mustache and beard, came nearer, stooping as they came.

Padgett, noting the various bales and bundles, put a hand on this one or that, as they progressed, asking in muffled tones:

“What’s this? And this, and this? Beads, eh? Cloth—good bright colors?”

One by one they carefully traversed the hold, avoiding the prisoners who seemingly were fast asleep. Yet the two boys heard every word so uttered. At last Padgett sank down on his haunches, drew a long whiff at his pipe, cast a searching look about him. Suddenly he fixed an eye on Lenan, saying:

“These be all right, Joe. How about them weepens you spoke about?”

“Can’t you take my word for it, Bill?” Lenan looked injured in some way.

“Can’t take nobody’s word for nothin’! When I go back I’ve got to know what I’m tellin’ them bucks and squaws. Yes, thur’s squaws along. They’ll want fire water, too.”

Laboriously Lenan crawled into another narrow recess between the banked up goods, Padgett following. The boys saw Lenan point

at a big jug, holding perhaps two gallons. Padgett grunted.

Finally he urged: "Lemme smell her, ef I can't taste her."

Lenan pulled the wooden stopper, and both of them scented the pungent odor.

"That's all right. Rantoul got it from Pierre. You know Pierre always keeps the right sort. Thar's two jugs. You can take one back with you if you want. Mebbe it'll put the Mingoes in a fightin' humor. Then, when they've got the boys, the other jug'll come in handy to make 'em do what we want 'em to do with the prisoners, so's they won't bother us no more."

Padgett considered this. "All right," said he. "I'll do that same. But fust I must see them shootin' irons. I don't doubt your word, Joe, but I've got to be sure when I tell them red fellers."

Off the two crawled to the extreme forward part of the hold, where more talk and further examinations went on. Meanwhile, it may be imagined that what the boys had already heard and seen was sufficiently disconcerting. It was

clear to both what they had only feared before. They were to be delivered into the hands of merciless savages—probably those with whom Big Buffalo consorted while his chief, Captain Pipe, was away in the northwest. Big Buffalo himself might be among them. With what glee would this savage Delaware wreak upon them, when helpless, the hatred he had always evinced towards the boys, especially Ree!

Crouching together, still simulating the sleep now banished from their eyes, they heard the two men returning: Padgett was apparently satisfied. They picked up the jug, but in starting on again Padgett stumbled against Ree's leg that was sleepily stretched out. The jar caused him to lose his grip on the jug. The jug fell with a bang, the cork popped out and some of the liquor splashed out before it could be recovered and re-stoppered with the aid of Lenan.

"Be careful, man," adjured the latter. "Good liquor's hard to get out here."

"Damn them boys!" Padgett gave Ree's leg a savage kick. "Wait 'til we get 'em where we want 'em!" Then the two passed on, Padgett, with effort, getting into his dugout and

paddling away into the darkness. Lenan crawled back to his own sleeping place, for his watch was over for that night.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ESCAPE

For a space the flat-boat seemed to be wrapped in silence but for the lapping of river wavelets against its sides. Finally Ree rose to a sitting position, and amid the general darkness he saw a small square of light in the forward end of the hold. He was rubbing his leg where Padgett had kicked it. The more he looked at that square of light the larger it looked.

"Those fellows must have left something loose," he cogitated, and straightway began to crawl towards it while John slumbered on. Right underneath the bow, a small trap-door had been shoved aside, doubtless to permit the pair to view more particularly the arms destined for Mingo consumption, for the piece of candle was about to go out.

Outside he heard a slight bump at the side of the flat, and by rising he saw the dim outline of a skiff, doubtless the tender to the flat. After

that he inspected the arms which, as Lenan said, were of the ordinary frontier type, with powder and ball in horns and pouches. Besides the ammunition thus shown Ree saw a keg, doubtless of powder, and a number of lead bars.

“That fellow meant what he said all right. If I wasn’t tied, I might load up one or two and stand these fellows off a while.”

With this thought his mind, rapidly working, conceived a scheme so daring yet so easy and apparently so feasible, that Ree at once hastened back to where John was making up for lost time in his own previously interrupted slumbers.

Once back by the younger lad, he nudged him until John woke up, then instantly sat up, regarding Ree dazedly while the latter asked for the knife.

“I know you got it,” said he. “We want to get out of here, don’t we? Well, there’s an open trap-door up in the bow. And there’s a skiff tied close by.”

By this time John handed him the knife, and in a trice Ree had cut the loosely tied raw-hide that confined his arms. In another minute, he had freed his own feet. Giving the knife

back to John, Ree turned to the recess where Lenan said there was another jug still undisturbed. Without much trouble he found it and, dragging it out softly, found that John had not only freed himself, but was carefully reconnoitering the open end, beyond which the sounds of snoring and other slumberous breathings were more evident than earlier in the night. Ree then picked up the knife.

Smelling at the stopper to see if it was real liquor Ree, knowing that John would follow and that time must not be wasted, crouchingly made his way to the recess directly under the trap-door, and proceeded to pick out a couple of rifles such as the boys would be familiar with, together with full powder horns and bullet pouches. By this time John was at his heels. Instantly John seized the gun selected for him, and slung horn and pouch over shoulder and under arm. He noticed that Ree had tied a short cord to the jug, after removing the wooden stopper, and was lifting it to the deck outside.

"Hold on," whispered John. "Some one may be out there."

"Don't you see, dough-head? I want to lower it overside so no one will hear." And

this Ree proceeded to do very carefully, first pushing it over the flat edge of the deck, then lowering by the cord. When he felt it sink into the water, he released the string. Turning back he whispered:

“There’s a guard laying over beyond the oar. But he’s asleep. Can’t you hear him snore?”

Thus reassured, and feeling pleased that they had thus gotten rid of half of the supply of fire water by which the evil minds of the red-men are unduly stimulated to deeper devilishness, the boys sought slyly for the rawhide attached to the skiff. Under the influence of the current it was really alongside, though the rope was fastened at the stern. Was there a paddle in it? Cautiously looking over they could see none.

“We must chance it anyhow,” said Ree. “Here’s a loose rived board.”

He had resurrected it from under the other guns. It had occurred to him to dump the guns over too; but the risk was too great to run. Some one might wake at any moment.

Being more slender, John was pushed up through the small opening, and while the savage

on guard snored as he lay prostrate on deck Ree was, in turn, cautiously hoisted out of their dark and stuffy prison. The moon, now well in mid-sky, shed a soft light over all. It was pretty, yet both boys felt that it added to the risks.

The Indian drew up one leg, grunted and to Ree seemed about to wake up. Instantly the boys sank back behind the slope of the roof rising from the narrow side deck. But the leg sank back and presently the snores rose up again to mingle with the heavy respirations forward.

While thus crouching low, Ree gradually lowered himself into the skiff, a small, frail affair. John handed down the board and rifles, then climbed down himself. As he did so he bumped against his comrade, who was handling the board, rather carelessly examining it. The slight shock jarred the board from Ree's hand. It fell with a loud splash into the water. But Ree had it again in an instant, but made so much noise that the sentinel by the oar again grunted, much louder than before.

"Cut the rope, John," whispered Ree.
"Cut it quick!"

While Ree was preparing to paddle vigor-

ously with the recovered board, John quietly cut the rawhide and the skiff began to drift downward, accelerated by paddle strokes with the board.

Commotion rose suddenly on board. At last the sleeping sentry by the suspended oar at the end of the flat sprang up and ran confusedly round the roofed over space towards the open end. Seeing the skiff drifting away, with two figures on board, he let out a whoop, then shouting in language unintelligible to the boys he raised his gun and fired.

He did not hit either of the boys but the bullet did hit the board, a rather wide one rived from some straight grained forest tree. It struck the board with a sharp impact, splitting it into two equal lengths, nearly jerking them out of Ree's hands. Nearly but not quite.

"We got a couple of oars now, John," handing one of them to the younger lad. "Get to paddling quick."

"Jimminy!" said John, seizing the improvised paddle. "Look at 'em on the flat. You raised thunder when you dropped it."

"That was your fault. You ought to be more careful who you bump into. Get to work,

kid. Let's make for that bushy point below. Looks as if it might lead somewheres."

Both boys paddled frantically down stream, edging towards the point in question. As the west shore was here rather low, and strung with islets thickly timbered that hid the mainland from view, Ree thought that once out of sight, they might soon lose their pursuers amid this trackless labyrinth. What the future might hold for them they did not bother much about, being too absorbed in the present chance, that of getting away from the flat-boat and avoiding possible pursuit.

Further firing from the river flat continued, but was hardly heeded. Surely those on board were poor marksmen; the Indians often are. But why did not another craft start after them? This had been the real dread in the minds of both. But so far as they could see under the uncertain moonlight the flat-boat not only remained stationary where she was lashed, but the boys could see no craft leaving her sides.

As they at last neared the wooded point, Ree suddenly turned to John as if realizing that a delightful possibility might after all be certainty.

"I begin to believe that this skiff is all the boat they had on that flat. I only hope it's so, don't you?"

"Too good to be true though, I'm afraid. She's so far off now we can't see very clearly." John reached over and began drinking water from the hollow of his hand. "Slow way of getting a drink, ain't it?"

But Ree, who had been more carefully watching the diminishing outline of their recent prison, noticed that the shape of the flat-boat seemed to be changing in the dim light.

"Look what they are doing now."

One swift look by John and he again bent to his paddle with renewed energy. Ree, understanding the import of this change, also renewed his strokes. Undoubtedly the flat-boat was beginning to move.

"They've cast loose, Ree. We must get somewhere out of sight, and get there quick. We must dodge them somehow."

In another very few minutes the skiff skirted the point and moved into a wooded recess, that apparently led nowhere. On all sides the undergrowth reached to the water's edge.

"Look sharp, Ree! There must be some

outlet—there!” John pointed to the right. “Isn’t that an opening?”

What looked like another recess loomed up a few yards away. Ree, scanning the angle, was about to ignore the offered refuge as a blind, when he saw a dull gleam, reflected from the moon, shimmer in a way that suggested water beyond the overhanging branches.

“See yonder,” pointing to the right and up-stream. “That looks good.”

“But it’s up-stream,” reproved John. “We don’t want to go up-stream, do we?”

“Might as well go that way when it’s the only way we can see.” And Ree began turning the skiff. “We haven’t any too much time to disappear anywhere. Paddle hard, John.”

Grumbling to himself John helped his best, and presently the skiff glided under some bushes that scraped their heads while much of the growth reached the water. For a few yards the growth seemed to thicken, and John was about to suggest quitting when they suddenly glided into a small open watery space that undoubtedly was thinning into open vistas on ahead.

Hardly had they arrived here than the sounds of human altercation, some distance to

the right of their present course but further down-stream, broke the immediate silence. Both boys ceased paddling and listened, catching hold of the low branches of undergrowth to hold the skiff motionless.

Presently they heard one or two voices they recognized.

"It's the flat, confound her!" said John at last in a low tone. "Don't you hear Lenan's Frenchy drone?"

Ree nodded but sat motionless, as did his comrade. The flat moved very slowly, keeping midstream by means of the oars at either end. Probably in a straight line there was not more than one or two hundred yards between the flat and the fugitives. Some one on board was cursing volubly. It was about the missing jug of whisky. He wound up by saying:

"You never told us there was any rum aboard, Lenan. Why didn't you?"

"Because I don't want any of this crew, just now, to get drunk. Later I wouldn't care so much. D'ye understand?"

The reply was unintelligible, probably because the speaker, one of the whites of the crew, spoke too low.

“What d’ye reckon Rantoul would say if we got drunk while we had those boys on board? We—”

“Ye hain’t got ’em now, have ye?” At this there was an audible snigger.

What later passed was not understood by the boys. Ree turned to John, saying: “What we know about their supply of liquor is that they had two jugs. One that fellow Padgett carried off. I hope he fills up on it and spills the rest. The other jug we’ve disposed of where it’ll do no one any harm. Ugh! The more I see of what whisky does to some folks, the more I’m glad that we don’t use it, except as medicine, when nothing else’ll do.”

Presently, as the skiff threaded its slow way up-stream amid the tortuous channels near the west shore, the flat-boat and its disgruntled crew gradually floated out of hearing below. The boys had gone a mile or more by inches, as it were, and were not only tired out but hungry as well.

This was one phase of their sudden escape which they had been unable to provide against. Yet it must be met, somehow. And, after all, the most likely way wherewith to effect an es-

cape from their immediate foes was to make their way northward, keeping as near the open river as they dare, in the hope that some one would pass who might aid them in returning to Fort Pitt. Sullen anger against Rantoul and his crafty, violent efforts also gnawed their consciousness. Ree kept silence as was his custom when inborn resentment was seething within him. But John was more explosive.

"I say this, Ree," he began at last, after both had taken generous draughts of river water in lieu of more substantial breakfast food, "if we ever do meet up with that fellow Rantoul, let's give him the drubbing he deserves. I—I'd like to punch his dirty face!"

"Always supposing that his face is not backed by others of his crew, so as to make retaliation rather too risky."

"Right you are, Ree! But I feel that a time will come when we'll have an even chance to square up matters a bit—don't you?"

"I hope so, John; but I don't let that rob me of any sleep."

After another mile or so had been laboriously pushed, pulled and paddled, amid these tortuous islet channels, the boys came suddenly

into view of the unbroken river, cleared of islets on the west side at least.

"What would we better do next?" queried John at last. "We've got to keep in hiding somehow. I'm tired. The moon's going down, and there'll be daylight soon in the east." He yawned heavily.

"There's a clump of undergrowth yonder. Let's sink this skiff and get on shore." Ree was searching his pockets and clothing.

"What ye want to find?" asked John, at the same time producing a snugly wound fishing line and hook. "What do you think of this?"

But Ree kept up his search, finally producing a small box of meat scraps which he had managed to secure, somehow, on board the flatboat, with a view to future emergencies.

"I knew you had a line, John. We'll get ashore, sink this skiff, do a little fishing, and perhaps get something to ease off this gnawing in our insides. I saw you crib that hook when the boat crew were fishing yesterday."

Accordingly this program was carried out. The skiff was sunk near the shore bushes and lashed fast by withes of bark. Notwithstand-

ing their general weariness they fished carefully under shelter of the undergrowth, and at last secured a moderate sized perch and a small cat-fish.

How to cook them? Fire must be had, though fire was dangerous, of course, as possibly betraying them to eyes that should not see it. But necessity knows no law but that which ministers first to the immediate imperative needs. If the boys were to keep up their fight against recapture, they must assuredly eat. So the fire was made, the fish, after cleaning, broiled, and quickly eaten to the last morsel. Even some of the bones were crunched between strong, youthful teeth. Then, carefully covering the embers of the fire, they put away the flint, tinder and steel, reconnoitered once more, then going more into the bushes, they lay down and were soon soundly asleep.

How long they slept they did not know, except that when Ree suddenly roused himself from unconsciousness he saw as he opened his eyes that the sun was in the west. Reproaching himself for thus oversleeping, and already uneasy, he was aware of a rustle in the under-

growth nearby. It attracted him, not unlike the vague fascination attributed to the serpent's eyes.

Nudging John, yet whispering to the boy to keep quiet, Ree saw a shaven head rise up slowly, as the owner peered cautiously forth, then a sloping scalp-lock with a hawk's feather attached surmounting the shaved head.

"Make like we're still asleep," whispered Ree, feeling for their guns laid handily between the two. "Mingoes," he also warned. "Keep still."

From another angle a second head emerged. When they saw the two lads, apparently in slumber, the heads were carefully withdrawn. The leaves were thick, yet a gentle rustling beyond the green curtain indicated that there were probably others.

"Now, John," whispered Ree, "don't get excited. It's one of those raiding parties, I guess. Reach quietly for your gun. We'll do the best we can."

Both lads, now fully awake, felt that their situation was desperate. No doubt they were out-numbered. But what could they do but fight?

Presently more heads appeared on three sides, leaving the river open. The Indians knew that this was a safe plan.

CHAPTER XIV

RECAPTURED. PADGETT TAKES A HAND

WITH the appearance of these heads the boys, with a common impulse, leaped to their feet and stood ready, their captured rifles in hand, determined to get in two shots if assaulted. Perhaps this was not wise: but wisdom in young heads is apt to be unduly influenced by warm-blooded courage from youthful hearts.

No sooner had the foe perceived that the seemingly sleeping victims were up and ready for them than they strangely melted back into the thick shrubbery. But Ree, instantly divining an ulterior purpose in this, merely turned to John, saying:

“It’s now or never. Let’s make a break.”

And straightway the couple dived into the nearest thicket, plunging fiercely, half blindly into—what they knew not. But the explanation

came with startling swiftness. At the noise made by the two during their first rush a dozen tawny forms leaped up and forward, closing in on the boys in overwhelming force. At their head was a strangely accoutered savage whom John at first thought he vaguely remembered, but was not certain. There was no time.

Ree did manage to fire one shot, but only broke one redman's arm. Then both were seized by many red hands, their weapons torn from their grasp and both lads flung prostrate within twenty feet of their sleeping camp. Hard and fast they bound them, drawing the rawhide thongs cruelly tight.

When the boys were at last subdued and helpless, the savage whom John felt he vaguely remembered came forward, and stood glaring at both for a moment. He turned away then and waved his arm commandingly, saying something in a tongue neither of the boys could understand.

After that the two were picked up, their feet loosened, though their arms were tightly bound still, and they were urged forward brutally by prods from rifle barrels and an occasional kick by some moccasined foot. Around

them were now gathered the whole apparent force of this party, doubtless one of the raiding, roving bands of Mingoes that then infested more or less this debatable portion of the Ohio wilderness.

At their head strode the savage whom John all but recognized. As the two lads toiled onward at a pace suited to their guard, John turned close to Ree.

"See that fellow that seems to be in charge? I've seen him before, but I can't make him out." Ree looked at the tall, half crouching figure, striding at the head.

"I'm not certain, but I think it is—"

A sharp prod from behind and a guttural exclamation from the nearest of their foes interrupted further talk.

"No speakee—keep tongue in head," commanded this savage who seemed to have some rude knowledge of the white man's tongue. "Wagh! We make white boy sick—sick—soon."

This was not encouraging. But the march was kept up rigorously for several hours, during which the boys' thirst gradually became acute. At last the party halted near a marshy spot in

the woods along the westerly course maintained throughout the morning. Leaves and rubbish were quickly cleaned away, disclosing a tiny purling stream of water filtering from the hillside.

The Indians all drank. Then the boys intimated their desire for a drink also and were about to follow suit when the fierce savage at their head came forward, dragging John forcibly back, and attempting to kick Ree aside. But the boy quickly resented this by seizing one foot, jerking it forcibly forward and all but throwing the owner on his back. So nearly was he prostrated that broad grins appeared on several swarthy war-painted faces, and one savage grunted aloud an open approval.

At this the savage whom Ree had nearly thrown down broke into what looked like passionate profanity in an unknown tongue, and administered several kicks to Ree, besides one or two cuffs at John's head. Then the party started forward again, the two boys already tormented by the pangs of unappeased thirst. Wearily they toiled on, the growing heat and general physical prostration getting the best of them. Finally the savage in the rear, the one

who had grunted approval, came close, pushed a leather water bottle into Ree's hand, saying in very low tones:

"Drink—drink—then make friend drink." Then he fell back.

Greatly astonished by this stealthy manifestation of friendly feeling, Ree drank, and furtively passed the flask to John, who also partially gratified his acute thirst.

After that nothing happened for another hour. The slow afternoon passed. Ree noted that the main course of their painful march had been a little south of west; that no open trail was followed, and the same direction was generally maintained. The country was gently undulating, at times hilly, and in the main covered with virgin forest. Here and there small streams were crossed, streams flowing eastward towards the Ohio. Along some of these streams the wooded tracts gave way to more open expanses of glade, native meadows of wild grasses, or the narrow margins of savannahs. Always the soil seemed fertile, justifying the future settlement of that section into what, a few years later, was the growing eastern belt of a young state yet to be one of the wealthiest amid the

clustering commonwealths that were to be the nucleus of the great mid-west section of our common country.

Little of this filled the minds of the tired, hungry boy captives when between sundown and dark the party arrived at one of the small Indian camps or villages, where the redmen occasionally made their larger headquarters for the time being: it might be for a month, or a whole season.

A number of squaws and children sallied out to meet them. From a larger wigwam of hides came more warriors, among whom both Ree and John recognized several whom they had met formerly among the more northern villages of the Delawares. But the proportion of alien savages, men of more than one tribe, banded together for purposes of general plunder, was disturbingly large.

Among these there came one white man, unknown to the boys by sight, but soon recognized by his voice and tone as the man with whom Lenan had talked when the dugout came to the flat; the same man who afterward left with the one jug of fire water, supposedly for the Mingoes he represented.

When he saw the captives, Padgett, for it was he, appeared to be astonished. At first he did not recognize them, but when talking with the newcomers, he heard what was sufficient to transfer his scrutiny towards the prisoners. At last he strode over to where they lay, still in bonds, weary, hungry, thirsty, generally discouraged.

"Howdy—you fellers," he began, glowering down at them.

Neither of the boys replied, for it was evident by what John had overheard that night that Padgett belonged to Rantoul's gang, or was in some way allied with those whose present purpose was to prevent these lads from returning to the east, for a time at least.

"What you two doin' out here—hey?" His eyes sparkled, and to John it seemed as if the fellow might be more or less under the influence of liquor. Still neither of them said a word. What more he might have said was cut short by a savage howl of glee outside the larger wigwam, where now a savage no less than the man both Ree and John thought they had seen before, was pouring forth draughts from a large jug, and giving to each warrior as he passed, the

crowd being squatted on the ground in a sort of circle.

Finally the man with the jug poured himself a brimming drinking horn full of the jug's contents and swallowed it, exclaiming gutturally but so as all could hear: "Scalp the palefaces! Let them die the death!"

The language was not Mingo now, but that of the Delawares. Who could the fellow be? Just then the white man called Padgett rushed up, snatched the jug from the other and put it behind him, saying:

"Where you get that liquor?" This in English. "You call yourself Big Buffalo. I'm white Bill Padgett. This rum is mine—d'ye hear?"

Whereat Big Buffalo, for it was he in Mingo disguise, renegade to his chief and tribe, turned to the crowd of half intoxicated red-men and shouted:

"Do we let this white man come here to tell us what we will do or not do?"

Rumbling cries of no rang out. The boys saw that a general rumpus was imminent, and felt that it boded ill for them, no matter which side came out ahead in the argument.

"It's Big Buffalo!" ejaculated John.
"He's no friend to us, is he?"

"No, of course he isn't. But it looks as if he and this Padgett were going to get into a mix-up. The only thing for us to do is keep quiet. Lucky I kept that knife Lenan dropped from the deck."

"You sure you got it, Ree?"

"Yes; I picked it up after we freed ourselves on the flat-boat."

Meanwhile the row among the redmen continued. The larger part, stimulated by the rum they had already drunk, backed Big Buffalo in his contention. He wanted the stuff consumed right now. They had the prisoners, the very boys he hated; and if they drank enough there was little doubt as to what would be the end of the matter. The boys would run the gauntlet; then, if alive, would be duly tortured later on.

As to the promised booty on board the flat-boat, Padgett had already assured them that it was really there, even to another jug of liquor and some arms and ammunition. So what was the use of delaying their good time longer? They had the prisoners that Rantoul wanted made way with. Therefore why delay?

Once these boys were safely out of the way, Lenan would have to pay the rest of the price as agreed on. If not, exposure—the thing Rantoul would most dread—would then lay within their power. All this and more did Big Buffalo floridly expatiate upon, while Padgett grumbled, but finally gave up the jug, still two-thirds full, to the fiercely urged demands which he at first resisted. Finally the leading warriors, over a dozen in all, adjourned to the larger lodge, with Big Buffalo in their midst. They were again custodians of “the paleface’s curse,” as some of the wiser Indians had more than once called the evil domination wrought by the stuff manufactured by white men only.

Two of the younger men remained to guard the prisoners, unwillingly; for they, too, wished to be where the jug would be doubtless emptied and the greater part of the camp more or less under its evil influence.

Presently their desire was gratified. Padgett, seeing that he, for the time being at least, was powerless to hinder the course of events, strolled over to where the captives sat, still in their bonds, still weary, discouraged, hungry and almost hopeless.

“Cheer up, boys,” he vouchsafed to the captives. “All is not yet over.”

They gave little heed, having only distrust for him in view of what they had seen him do and say.

“Keep quiet,” he began again in a low voice. “I want to have a talk with you fellers. Don’t notice anything.”

With this he unceremoniously approached the two guards seated a little distance away. The boys heard him begin a low voiced conversation in the Indian tongue most used among these semi-outlaws and the savages along this border. Finally, with assentive grunts, these young men picked up their guns and departed for the big lodge, whence sounds as of growing savage hilarity, if so it might be called, now issued.

“Thar!” said Padgett, returning to the boys. “F’or a spell at least I guess they’ll stay away. I’m your guard now, but don’t think I mean to let you two git away. I means friendly by ye. But I’m pledged to my red brothers here not to do no underhand business. How come ye to git away from the flat?”

“What is that to you?” said Ree bluntly.
“We got away—that’s all.”

“Well, you didn’t stay away any great spell, did ye?”

“See here, Mr. Padgett, if that’s your name,” remarked John. “We don’t know what you’re up to, but we don’t trust you after what I heard you tell Lenan last night.” John faintly grinned; only faintly, however, for he was weak, and almost discouraged. “Yes, I did,” noting Padgett’s doubting expression.

“Well, you heard me, did ye? That puts a differnt face on it. But I’m more your friend than that renegade that calls hisself Big Buffalo.”

“At any rate, Big Buffalo is an open enemy. He never liked us.”

“And therefore he is going to git them other fellows so drunk that they will do ’bout whatever he wants ’em to do. Know what that is?”

John did not reply; but Ree did.

“From what we have experienced from him in the past, it will be nothing good. That we know.”

"Tell ye what I know, boy!" Padgett's manner was grim but kindly, as if he held himself in reserve, so as to see how his advances were met. "He'll try to get them chaps so drunk that they'll make ye run the gauntlet, and if ye come thoo alive, he'll induce 'em to torture ye to death, somehow. Any old way, so as it isn't delayed too long—see? If it's put off too long, they'd git sober, and when a crowd's git-tin' sober after bein' drunk on sech liquor as that, they's apt to be some on 'em might git to repentin'."

"Why should he wish to kill us?" demanded John. "Rantoul sent us on down in that flat. But I guess he only wanted us kept out of the way while he secured a state title to some land we bought fairly and squarely of the Delawares. We were on the way to get the state's title when Rantoul had us kidnapped. For all we know you might have been in that gang, seeing you so thick with Lenan as you were last night. I guess that jug of fire water was the one he gave you to show these Mingoes, wasn't it?"

Padgett was too wise to show the astonishment he really felt. But John did not pursue that phase of the matter further. He was too

tired, too discouraged. Whatever Padgett felt, his outward manner became more friendly than before.

"All this won't help us now," he said. "I like you boys—yes, I do. Whatever I've did, I did it because I always stick to bargains. But when I made any bargains I didn't go in for murder, and that's what you two are in for now, if I'm any judge. Listen at 'em!"

Inside the lodge the noise of warlike encouragement was growing more and more fierce, more uproarious. Big Buffalo was having things his own way; and that it was not a good way, but most harmful to the boys they full well realized, though never so painfully as now.

Ree sat with compressed lips, stolidly listening. But now he said:

"What does all this tend to anyway? Why are you bothering, unless you mean to help us in some way? Are you sincere, Padgett?"

In reply Padgett leaned close and tapped Ree's shoulder.

"Have you got a knife—one you can carry hid from these fellers?"

The boys glanced at each other meaningly. Was Padgett trying to find out what they had

in order to make them more helpless? Before they could reply he thrust a hand in his pocket, and produced a knife.

"Thank you," replied Ree, "but we have a knife." And he calmly produced the knife which Lenan had dropped through the hawse hole.

"Well, I'll be durned!" Padgett did not disguise his astonishment. "Now I sees how it was you freed yourselves and got away. But surely they searched ye both more'n once!"

Ree could have explained, but did not think it worth while. Besides, he did not thoroughly trust Padgett yet. Padgett, however, gave the other knife to John, saying:

"Might as well take that, too. One never knows when a knife might be handy. By the way they're goin' on in thar, I 'low they're liable to bust out at any time. But—boys," here his manner grew earnest, "I'm goin' to stop at murder, no matter what happens. It was one thing to help kidnap you chaps when the pay was big enough. But murder, sech as this crowd are gittin' in the mood to do, isn't in my game at all. I want ye to believe that. I'm white, and I won't see whites put upon to

that extent, if I can stop it. Don't fergit that offn your minds."

"Listen," said John uneasily, for the commotion within that lodge was rising rapidly into whoops, the dreaded war whoop of the Mingoes. "We may as well get ready for most anything."

"Now, lads," said Padgett, "lissen to me. I've got to seem to stand in with 'em, long as it looks safest to you all as well as to me. But if they lay hands on ye, and knives or tommy-hawks are out, I'll be differnt—see?"

Before the boys could formulate a reply there came a louder whoop than usual, and more prolonged. A throng of savages burst through the lodge entrance, knives and hatchets in hand, at their head Big Buffalo, and made towards the boys and their guide, Padgett.

At first the latter turned as if to welcome them, but seeing the weapons waving, and noting the yells and manner of the outflow, he wheeled suddenly.

"Gimme one of them knives," he said hoarsely. "Quick! Ye must be loosed instanter. Hurry—no time to lose!"

In a trice he, with Ree's aid, had cut the bonds that tied the two. Almost at the same

time he passed a pistol to each one, keeping his rifle. The few squaws and children that were near scattered at these manifestations.

“Foller me!” said Padgett. “Ef any of ‘em get too near—shoot!”

CHAPTER XV

RESCUED. A RACE TO CONNECTICUT

DRIFTING with the current and now and then being pushed by poles, Ricky Skree's flat went down the river as fast as possible. The huddle of cabins where Wheeling now stands was quickly left out of sight behind the various crooks and turns of the upper Ohio.

All day they poled, steered, drifted, keeping mainly nearer to the Ohio side and watching keenly for any sign that might indicate the nearness of those in search of whom this pursuit was being made. Night came. They had made good progress, but that was all. Once or twice at more open elevations, brief landings had been made and hurried surveys with the eye taken from the most promising tree or other elevation. Nothing resulted.

Reaching the first of the series of small islets that fringe the western shore, the flat zig-zagged in and out, keeping mainly close in to the main shore. At one spot the channels were

growing so intricate that Ricky suggested their keeping out more in mid-channel.

“Well, perhaps we will ter-morrow. But—” This from Tom Fish, who with Arthur Bridges had maintained a keen eye search everywhere.

But Tom’s remark was never finished, for just then the flat-boat struck a snag or perhaps a hidden rock. It did not at first seem probable. Just here the narrow channel appeared most clear. Yet the flat was swinging broadside on, refusing to respond to the current’s urge.

Arthur, looking over the up river side of the flat, first noted that the big boat was grating slowly over the obstruction, whatever that was. He was about to call for help to push the flat downward, when the bulge of a boat rim began to show as the flat slid further along.

“Tom,” he called out, “come here quick!”

By the time Tom arrived the rim had risen so that both saw it was a small skiff, evidently sunken by weights inside. The weight of the flat had tilted the skiff so that the weight had slidden to the end, thus emancipating the lighter end of the small boat. Ricky came hurrying up, pole in hand.

One quick look over, and the old boatman stared as if at something at once strangely familiar.

"Holy smoke!" he began, sticking his pole under one side of the skiff, and tilting it still more, so that the flat-boat swung easily off. "I 'low that boat down thar is one I owned not more'n two weeks ago. Let's stop. I'm goin' to see what this means."

Though both Tom and Bridges urged further speeding up until it was so dark they would have to stop, Ricky remained unconvinced. At this juncture Wah Wah, who from the stern had been watching the shore, called forth:

"See where fire been made. Look like feesh bone."

By this time all on board were curiously interested and no further objection came when Ricky pushed the flat as close to the bank as possible, bidding some one get out and make fast to one of the saplings lining the edge.

This done, Ricky without heeding the scattered fish bones or the ashes of an extinct camp fire, waded into the shallow water, intent upon further investigating the sunken skiff.

Tom and Arthur jumped ashore, discovering fresh tracks about the ashes. More than that they did not resemble to their trained eyes those of redmen.

Bridges picked up a straggling fish-line that he at once recognized. The rest hastened up as he pointed.

"I know that," he cried. "John had that line. It's a peculiar color."

Further in among the bushes could be seen where some parties had passed the night in slumber. Here were other tracks, evidently of savages, further out. There were signs of a struggle. Losing interest in all else the whole party, including Ricky, who had dragged the skiff ashore, examined the yet visible signs of the short flight and struggle with overpowering foes which has already been described. They came to but one conclusion.

Ricky further enforced this by saying:

"I remember now," he said, "that thar skiff, which I made myself. I traded it off to a Frencher that called hisself Lenan. He had a flat, too. And 'twas his boat that Pierre got hold of later. Yes, sir! I reckon them boys must 'a' got away somehow, and took the skiff.

By the signs of fire and the eatin', back yander, I reckon they must 'a' stopped here and one of them raidin' bunches of Mingo devils must 'a' got 'em. That's the way I figures it out."

"Well, then," began Tom Fish, "our work's cut out for us right here."

"Look what I found," and Arthur was holding up a peculiarly shaped fur cap, made of coonskin, that all of them who knew John recognized. "I found it out yonder," pointing toward the timber leading westward from the river bank.

A little further probing and putting together of the shreds of such evidence as were then obtainable soon convinced all that further pursuit of the fugitive flat might, for the present at least, be given up. This later evidence showed that those whom they sought must, in all probability, be somewhere else. As Tom had indicated, their present task was to follow up this new trail as speedily as possible. Ricky Skree, naturally averse to leaving his own flat unprotected in this solitary spot, hinted that he was too old to take up what might be a long trail afoot.

"All right," assented Tom. "You stay

here on your own boat. You'll have weepens and ammunition and grub. Reckon you can hold the fort 'til we-alls gets back? We mayn't have to go very fur, anyhow."

Half an hour later the others, six in number, agreed to this readily. Ricky himself was more than satisfied. When the boys were rescued, or if not found, their fate more clearly ascertained, still the flat would be waiting. It was hardly probable Ricky or his boat would be disturbed; for at that time other rivermen frequently lived on their flats, often cultivating virgin lands nearby. There came a brief period for rest, then after breakfast on board the flat, the six set out, three being white men, three Indians. Big Pete and Black Eagle being better at trail following than river boating, were particularly industrious not only in nosing out the trail, but in localizing, or individualizing certain details, so that soon they were more than persuaded that what was now being followed so closely was the two young boy pioneers, but that they were prisoners in the hands of a band of roving Indians, more than likely to be Mingoes.

Closely they followed the pretty broad trail left by the savages, who were more interested,

apparently, in getting on to their village than anything else.

Sunset came, then the dusk. But before they went further a halt was made for a brief lunch of parched corn and jerked venison together with water from a woods spring. Intuitively they kept rather silent, fearing that they were nearing some spot where the savages they were after might have their temporary encampment. Lucky it was they did so, for when they were about to push on a little further under the coming moonlight, there rose in the near distance the cries of whippoorwills, indicating that human habitations were near at hand. Though the whippoorwill loves solitude, he loves it best when near the human denizens of the woods.

"Watch out," cautioned Big Pete, then in advance. "We might be gittin' near to some village."

Creeping cautiously on, a last western glow showed signs of the woods opening in that direction. They had gone on a mile or so, disregarding the sign of trail as the darkness thickened. All at once half muffled sounds of yells, whoops, and other human noises came unmistakably from somewhere on ahead.

“What’d I tell ye!” broke in Pete again.

With their guns in readiness the party hurried forward, while the nearing sounds of savage commotion smote increasingly on their ears. The woods opened and a broken vista of Indian lodges was disclosed as the shadows gave way to an open glade.

“Go easy, boys,” said Tom Fish, in the lead, with Big Pete and Bridges close by, while High Horse, Black Eagle and Wah Wah crouched lower as they sniffed the signs of coming battle with their ancient foes, the roving Mingoes, whose hands, like those of Cain, were against every man who would not bow to their merciless wills.

A few small fires gleamed here and there. By their light a stream of redskins were seen running towards a smaller group that was somewhat nearer. Women and children were also flocking as towards a common center. In front of the advancing warriors was a tall savage, brandishing tomahawk and pistol. Others held scalping knives.

The group that was nearer at first seemed half motionless, though one figure bent over the others. These, however, sprang up and the

group began to retreat in the direction of the newcomers who were as yet concealed by outlying bushes. High Horse, his eyes sharp and his sense of woods acumen exceedingly keen, slapped his hand against his mouth, uttering a rising series of cries, intermingled with exclamations.

“Ugh-h-h-h-h! Big Buffalo! Ug-h-h-h-h! Mingo! Ug-h-h-h-h-h-h! Paleface! Ugh-h-h-h-h! Hi-yah-h-h-h-h! White boys! Ugh-h-h-h-e-e-e—”

Here his cries were rendered indistinguishable by the cries of the others, who began to recognize the lads they had come so far to rescue.

“Hit’s them, boys—whoopee!” yelled Big Pete, springing forward boldly into view. “Our boys and Bill Padgett! Yow-ow-ow—wow!”

By this time all the others had recognized their friends. And, though perplexed by the sight of Padgett, whom they looked on as a friend of the Frenchers and the Mingoes, it did not abate their ardor for the fight now on.

When Big Buffalo and the oncoming savages, fired with the liquor they had consumed, saw the new arrivals, it stayed them only for a

moment. Right before their eyes the two prisoners, aided apparently by Padgett himself, had risen up with weapons in hand, and—where now was the promised sport?

Instead of that they had a bitter fight on hand. But the fires within them brooked no delay. It would be sport of another kind with victory, of course, to be on their side. Already they saw that they out-numbered their foes at least two to one.

With a final high-sounding yell Big Buffalo turned towards the newcomers, and his followers did likewise, while numerous war-cries resounded through the wooded aisles of the forest that had so often, of late, resounded here and there along that border with similar roars.

“Watch out, boys!” cried Tom, always keeping his head as the excitement waxed. “There’s too many on ’em. What’s our business here? To git them boys back to Fort Pitt. Watch out!”

Luckily for the newcomers and also the boys, the Mingoës, anticipating only the gauntlet running, had left most of their guns in the lodge. But with knives and tomahawks they came on. The crack, crack of pistols now rang

out. High Horse and Big Buffalo were engaged in a hand-to-hand duel, consisting mostly in dextrous dodging of each other's knife or hatchet.

Big Pete had already felled one man and was making for a second. Tom and Black Eagle, more cool headed, were still curbing their own comrades, while standing off the enemy. Padgett, as the boys plunged in among their friends, drew back, but was seized by Ree who said: "You come with us, friend. You've got a good white streak in you. Come on!"

Padgett went. Perhaps he realized that his day with the other side was over. At least he had proved his ultimate honesty, in stopping short of further aiding in murder.

At this point, a stream of squaws were seen emerging from the big lodge, each carrying one or more rifles, and making for the savages under Big Buffalo, who were now rather inclined to hold back. Tom Fish instantly divined the meaning of this maneuver.

"Come on, lads!" cried the old scout. "What we got ter do is to make a get-away, while the goin's are good. Come on, I say! Give 'em a fare-you-well, while we got the chance."

He levelled his gun for the first time at the nearest savage, now slowly retreating towards a squaw who held out two rifles, and dropped his man. Bridges dropped another, as did Big Pete. Wah Wah, seeing this, made a vigorous attempt to scalp the nearest savage that had dropped, but was nearly brought down himself by one of the Mingoes, who had snatched a gun from the woman and fired hastily. But the ball only made a flesh wound in Wah Wah's leg, causing him, however, to limp more or less the remainder of the retreat.

Meanwhile High Horse had managed to strike a glancing blow at Big Buffalo that partially stunned that brute, shaving off his scalp-lock so nicely that it must have taken several weeks before he could grow another one. And be it known that a flowing scalp-lock was the one flaunting signal the average redman loved to wave in the face of the foes he was supposed to meet, as if he said in so many words: "Come and take it if you can, or lose your own."

By this time our friends, with their rescuers, were pretty well within the shelter of the woods. The Mingoes, though now armed and more numerous, had suffered the loss of several

in killed and wounded, while their most bellicose leader had much of his drink-inspired ardor taken out of him by his encounter with High Horse. They were therefore not nearly so eager as before to assault and retake their prisoners. Besides this the Indians, as fighters, are best when skulking about the foes they can attack at an advantage. Gradually, therefore, the pursuit relaxed and finally ceased, at least for the present.

By the time our friends, the boys and Padgett along with them, were able to halt long enough to take an account of stock, they found that all were there. Wah Wah's leg wound was dressed. It was not serious.

After shaking hands with the boys, and giving them such food and drink as they had along, old Tom, now virtually in command, turned to the scout known as Padgett.

"Bill," said Tom, "I've knowd ye a number of years. Why ain't you back among your own kind? Ain't you sorter out of place here?"

"Ask them boys as you folks came out here to git," replied Padgett. "Whatever they says I'm willin' to abide by."

Before Tom could speak further, both John

and Ree spoke up. John, as the most ready with his tongue, gained the floor, so to speak.

“We don’t know much about Padgett, but we do know this, Tom. He’s been a true friend tonight. If it hadn’t been for him, I doubt if you would have got us at all, without a bitter fight. First, he let them drink up his whisky. It made ’em drunk and act the fool as you’ve seen. Second, when he saw how things were going, he gave us a knife and helped us free ourselves. Before that he talked to our guards, made ’em leave and took their place himself. Before you were heard or seen at all, he did this. When we first heard you all, we were free and with him among us, and with these pistols that he gave us we were making for the woods. That is why I say Padgett has proved to be our friend when we needed a friend.”

After that the matter was quietly accepted and soon Padgett appeared to be pretty much at home. In fact he was more comfortable than he had been among the Mingoes.

From then on the party rapidly retraced its steps and, though tired and weary enough, arrived at the place where they had left Ricky

Skree with his flat about sun-rise the following morning. Ricky, somehow, seemed to have sensed that they would soon return. As they wearily climbed aboard his boat, he met them with a broad grin, saying:

"I dreamt last night that ye had found them boys, partly by good luck, and partly by the help of another paleface. Who was he?"

Even old Tom Fish stared. "I always did believe in dreams," said he. "But this is a stunner." He turned to Padgett and gripped that stolid scout's hand. "Atter this I have no doubt whatever that ye're with us from this time on. But laws a mercy, Ricky, we're tired and hongry!"

As luck had it Ricky had acted in accord with his dream. He had cooked for the day and an ample supply of the usual eatables were presently being devoured by the hungry, tired men.

Thus rejuvenated, they set to, and by hard poling pushed on up the river for a couple of miles, anchoring at last under the shelter of an island, about the last of the groups along the shore and more near the middle than the others.

Here they anchored, and rested for the day,

leaving one man on guard, who was relieved every two hours so as to give all a chance to sleep.

After that, so diligently did they apply themselves to their work that they reached the tiny village, now called Wheeling, the following day. Here it was determined that all the party but Ricky should proceed to Fort Pitt by the same trail they followed, at least some of them had—when starting out after the boys.

Ricky, satisfied with the modest pay he had asked for the use of his flat, remained in the village. He, Tip Tate, Rod, and others, were to take another trip down the river, which had been delayed by the present rescue of our boy pioneers.

At Fort Pitt they learned that Rantoul, alarmed by sundry reports concerning the kidnapping, had resigned his personal part in the French effort to secure state title to the Ohio lands and had gone north to be out of the way for a while. But there were others still bent upon going east in pursuit of their original intention. Then and there Return Kingdom and John Jerome concluded that the safest plan was for them all to start at once for Connecticut.

This they did at once. The Indians did not go, but were well paid for such services as they had rendered in the past.

Day after day as the travelers hurried along much the same way as Ree and John had traversed, under such different circumstances, only a few months before, the friendships of the party, one for another, grew stronger. No part of the journey did John enjoy so much, however, as when they all stopped at the Eagle tavern where he and Ree had had their experience with the rascally Ichabod Nesbit.

"Flax around, my good friend! Give us the best you've got," was the order he gave the landlord, and the fellow did "flax around" with amazing anxiety to please.

Ree smiled with deep satisfaction as John winked at him in silent comment on the marked change in the landlord's manner. Perhaps that individual realized that he had different boys to deal with than when these same two had been guests at his establishment before.

And it was true; seven months of hardships and absolute self-dependence had made of Return Kingdom and John Jerome manly young men, old beyond their years, cool, self-reliant,

self-respecting, as their Bruceville friends were soon to see.

From the vicinity of the Eagle tavern the five travelers took the coach which ran to Bruceville, and scarcely had Ree mounted to a seat beside the driver, whom he chanced to know slightly, than he learned from that individual something which interested him very much. It was that at a stopping place earlier in the day, the man had seen a party of seven Frenchmen who were on their way to Hartford, they said, and were highly indignant because the coach they wished to take was completely filled and they must wait for the next one.

Ree inquired further concerning the men. Hartford was the capital of the state (jointly with New Haven at that time) and men who wished to buy government land would be likely to go there. He secured a description of the fellows, and told Arthur Bridges about them.

"The identical chaps!" exclaimed the man who had been guide for the French party in the Ohio country. "We must head them off!"

Nothing could be done, however, without the help of Capt. Bowen and other friends, who would know just what action to take, and Ree

and John and their party continued on to Bruceville at the best speed possible.

There was the usual congregation of men and boys and loafers about the Bruceville tavern when the mud-spattered, dusty coach rolled up to the place, and the driver with a superb flourish threw the reins to the man in waiting. No one was expecting to see Return Kingdom and John Jerome there, much less Big Pete Ellis, who had left the town a fugitive, and when Kingdom climbed down from his seat on the box and John and Ellis emerged from their seats inside, there was a surprise such as the tiny hamlet had not known for many a day. Tom Fish and Arthur Bridges were not known, but it mattered not, as they were continuing on by the same coach to Bridges' home, having planned to watch the movements of the "land sharks" for the boys for a day or two. It was enough for Bruceville that the two lads whom many people had expected never to see again, should so suddenly reappear, and the strangers with them were not much noticed.

What hand shaking there was! Some looked suspiciously upon Pete Ellis, but by their actions the boys gave all to understand that

friends of theirs must treat the former fugitive in a friendly manner, and Ellis, quick to notice this, was far more grateful than he could have told in words.

Little need is there to tell at length how the news of the boys' return, and the mystery of Big Pete being with them, was quickly spread far and near. And little the young pioneers cared what people said about their being in "bad company"; they knew they were in the right, and though there was much criticism of them before all learned Pete Ellis' strange story, they let the gossips talk.

One of John's brothers was among those present to see the coach come in, and he led that young gentleman home in triumph and high glee. With only a few words to the friends, who gathered round, Ree excused himself and walked quickly cross-lots to Capt. Bowen's home accompanied by Big Pete.

With boyish hilarity the good old captain greeted his young friend and with all hospitality took Ellis into his home, also, without a question. Never before had Ree seen the value of having a good name so forcibly illustrated. He knew that Capt. Bowen thought it strange that Big

Pete was with him, but he knew, too, that the old gentleman also felt that it must be all right or it would not be so.

At an early opportunity Ree explained everything, and told his story in full. To his great relief the Captain said that there was not the least danger of the French "land sharks" buying the tract on which he and John had settled, because there was some controversy as to whether the territory in that part of Ohio belonged to the United Colonies or to Connecticut alone. The state claimed it upon a grant which had been made by James I. The ownership had not been settled and meanwhile there could be no sale of any part of the land.

Capt. Bowen was personally acquainted with the Trumbull family, so prominent in all early Connecticut affairs, and assured Ree that he would take care of the boys' interests and see to it that neither the Frenchmen nor any one else deprived them of their rights, though he had no doubt the "land sharks" had gone to Hartford to try to purchase the land.

The friendly old soldier then turned to the case of Big Pete Ellis. That, too, he said, could be speedily taken care of. The very next morn-

ing, indeed, he and Ree and Pete drove to see the proper officials and entered the latter's appearance for trial, the Captain signing his bond, so that he was not even locked up.

But the case of the State of Connecticut vs. Peter Ellis was never tried. It was dropped when it was found that the giant fellow had really reformed and Jim Huson, on Ree's account, refused to prosecute.

Just here, also, another interesting circumstance must be related. Less than a month after Big Pete's return, and while he was working on Capt. Bowen's farm, came news that by the death of an aunt, he had inherited a fine piece of property. The bequest was conditional upon his having abandoned his wild ways and settled down by the time the will was made public. This Pete had certainly done to the satisfaction of everybody.

Ree and John were no less delighted than he over his good fortune and were likewise glad that the farm thus given him was only a few miles from that of Arthur Bridges' mother, where Arthur and Tom Fish were settled down to work and good living.

To the two boys Ellis gave all the credit for

his reformation, and saying that but for them he would have remained in the west and never have received his legacy, he insisted on making them each a handsome cash present.

On the Sunday following their return home Ree and John met at church and afterward they went to the Catesby home, Mrs. Catesby and Mary having come back to the farm for the summer. How delightful it was to see these old friends again, and to sit and talk with them in their pleasant parlor, which was thrown open in honor of the visitors! And Mary was prettier and more winning in all her ways than ever before, and jolly as could be, though she became quite serious as Mrs. Catesby pressed the boys to tell of their adventures and they related some of them.

“Surely you will never go back there—never go so far past the frontier again, will you?” she asked. “I should think the country farther east would be quite wild enough—and dangerous enough, too!”

“But you see,” said Ree, reflectively, though he smiled at her tone of alarm, “everything in all our experience that seemed a misfortune or hardship at the time, has turned out

luckily for us. When Big Pete Ellis caused us to miss our talk with Jim Huson the night he ran away, for instance, we were quite put out. But except for that Ellis would not have been where he was when I so badly needed him; and but for Pete's running away, too, we might never have met Capt. Bowen, who did so much for us, and whose knife came in so handy.

"It was all for the best that I lost the knife in the strange way I did, and all for the best that Ichabod Nesbit tried to rob us at the Eagle tavern. If he had not done so, he would not have chanced to kill the young Indian, North Wind, and would not in consequence, have been killed himself, but would have followed his plan of going into the Ohio country to find and kill Arthur Bridges and might have succeeded.

"I speak of these things only to show that we can never tell just what is best for us, and what seems like the worst kind of an obstacle may really be a stepping stone. And the Ohio country is a beautiful place. It will be all settled some day, even more than Connecticut is now; but some one must make the start."

"Even if that 'someone' is but two boy pioneers," said Mrs. Catesby, with a little sigh

and a smile. "For my part, I think that both of you have already done your share, what with your having brought our own Arthur Bridges home, and having made a man of that formerly good-for-nothing Peter Ellis."

Notwithstanding the advice of Mrs. Catesby and many other friends, Ree and John did return to the Ohio country. Many were their adventures, and great their hardships, but they lived to see Ohio one of the Union's grandest states, and themselves two of its worthy and well-to-do citizens.

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